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NOT IN THE CENTER OF THIS REALM OF FLAMES WAS A SPECTACLE THAT GAVE
BOOTS SUCH A START AS HE HAD NEVER BEFORE EXPERIENCED.

OR,

TOO SHARP FOR THE SHARPER.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "DETECTIVE DICK," "PHIL HARDY,"
"THE BOSS BOY," "WILL WILDFIRE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BOOTS ON "THE MACHINE."

THIRTY or forty years ago a far more wild and lawless condition of affairs ruled in our large cities than at present.

Those were the days of the volunteer fire-companies. Against these in themselves we have not a word to say. They were organizations of the highest usefulness, which in their day did noble work.

But the rivalry between the various com-

panies, and the enmity between many of them gave rise to groups of quarrelsome adherents, who were ever ready for a fight or a riot.

In those days the police service was much less efficient than it has since become, and the excitement occasioned by a fire was apt to find vent in a desperate quarrel which the guardians of the law were powerless to quell.

Buildings were set on fire by lurking villains for the purpose of bringing out the companies, and the wild rush through the streets of long rows of men dragging the ponderous engines, the shouting and the roar of fire-horns, the alarm of the bells, the struggle of rival companies for precedence, the street races, all roused a fierce excitement, which needed little to stir it up into a desperate fight, during which the flames were occasionally permitted to gain unquenchable control of the burning building.

Such were some of the scenes of the days of volunteer fire organizations, evils for which the members themselves could not be held responsible, but which were mainly the work of the crowds of lawless adherents which attached themselves to every company.

It is in this period that our story lies, and in the "Quaker City" of Philadelphia, which was then the scene of many a disgraceful fire-riot, though it was also marked by much noble and disinterested service by the volunteer fire organizations.

It was a dark night in the month of April, 18—. The streets of the Quaker City, then sparsely lit up with gas lamps, were full of shadows which the electric beam now dispels.

The moonless and heavily-clouded sky added to the darkness. There was a threat of rain in the air, and few passengers were abroad, although the night was yet young.

But such people as were in the streets were suddenly startled by a loud, quavering cry of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" as a man came dashing onward at full speed, making the air vibrate with his wild clamor.

Men started and looked round them eagerly as he passed. Some asked him questions which he paused not to answer. Others gazed anxiously for the glare of a conflagration, or broke into a full run for the locality of the nearest engine company.

Among the latter was a half-grown boy who had been coiled up in a window embrasure behind a tobacconist's sign. He sprang with a bound to his feet on hearing the alarm-cry, looked around him with an excited sparkle in his eye, and then dashed wildly after the man, echoing his cry of "Fire!" in a tone of elfish delight.

He evidently was a street vagrant, judging by his mop of hair covered with a greasy slouched hat, and his clothes so full of rents that they stood out like sails in the wind as he ran.

But his most noticeable feature was a pair of boots, much too large for him, and which came up far above his knees.

These were kept on by pieces of rope fastened to the straps and carried over his shoulders like a pair of improvised suspenders.

The little "Arab" clutched these ropes with both hands as he ran, his heavy boots clattering on the pavement. Yet he made good headway despite his difficulties, and yelled as lustily as the man whose footsteps he closely followed.

Many an eye turned to look at him, and many a smile broke out on bearded lips, as the comical figure clattered by, as full of energy and excitement as if on an errand of life and death.

"Hello, Boots!" cried one person who seemed to know him. "Port your helm, youngster! Whereabouts is the fire?"

"Dunno where!" yelled the boy back. "Don't keer where 'tis so it's a bu'ster."

"Where are you going, then?"

"Goin' fur the Indy. This boss runs with the Indy, every time."

As he spoke the doors of a fire-engine-house at no great distance ahead were flung open, and the heavy hand-engine was dragged out with a whirl, with half a hundred men at the rope.

It was the "Industry," a well-known engine of that part of the city.

At the end of the rope ran a stalwart man grasping the stout fire horn, through which he roared hoarse orders to his followers as he tugged at the load.

Those behind him yelled excitedly, until the street became a tempest of clamor.

The heavy machine bounded over the stones, new persons flying to the rope until full a hundred men and boys tugged it onward.

And now the deep-toned State House bell, and smaller bells in other parts of the city, pealed out their alarm, rousing everybody to the con-

sciousness that the demon of fire had seized upon some home or workshop, and calling everybody to the desperate struggle with the fire.

The tocsin of the fire-bells has since been replaced by the silent message of the electric wire. But in those days all the citizens were warned of the danger to their homes, and thousands rushed to the scene where the great mass of the people now remain in ignorance that anything unusual is taking place.

Through street after street sped the engine, with its yelling host at the rope, behind whom the heavy machine bounded like a thing of no weight.

But what had become of "Boots," whom we left running toward the engine-house, as he gave vent to his lusty yell of "Fire! Fire!"

Ah! the little gamin knows what he is about! There he is, perched on the engine, to which he has climbed with the agility of a cat.

The young Arab, in fact, has gained the summit of the tower or galley in the center of the engine, where he is perched like a king upon his throne, clinging fast despite the bounds and jerks of the rattling machine.

"Guv it to her, lads!" he shouts. "Make her spin! Go it, you jolly cripples! Lay down! Lay down, Indies!"

"Who's that!" cried one of the firemen angrily, as he looked around. "Hallo! It's Boots!"

"You bet!" rejoined the independent vagrant. "I'm boss o' this yere injine. 'Let 'er rip! Yander come the Goodies. Ain't goin' to let 'em lay us out, are ye?"

The Good Will engine, of which he spoke, now swung from a side street into that occupied by the Industry, and the next moment a lively but good-natured race had begun for the scene of the conflagration.

Side by side they rattled over the rough cobble-stones of the street, each dragged by fully a hundred men and boys, all yelling together at the top of their lungs, while hoarse orders came at intervals through the brazen fire-horns.

Boots had much trouble now to keep on his perch, being flung into the air in successive jolts as the engine bounded over the rough stones.

Yet he clung to his seat like an Indian to his horse, and grew wild with delight as the Industry showed signs of drawing ahead of its rival.

"Hooray for our side!" he shouted. "We're fetchin' 'em, Indies. We're fetchin' the beggars. Scrouge 'em! Scrouge 'em inter the curb! Jolly, lads! Let her rip!"

As he saw that his side was gaining in the race he could not contain his exultation. He sprang to his feet and danced on the unsteady surface of his perch, shouting down taunting remarks to the rival company.

It was too much for flesh and blood to bear. A half-brick, flung by a sure hand, came hurtling through the air toward the insulting youngster.

Only an accident saved his head from the dangerous missile. The engine gave a rough bound over a high stone, flinging the urchin from his feet just as the brick hurtled past his head.

Headforemost downward went the boy into the depths of the engine, his body sinking out of sight, his boots sticking up into the air, while loud roars of laughter at his misfortune broke out from every side.

It was no time now to stop to extricate him. The engine bounded onward, leaving him to get out of his difficulty the best way he could, his boots wildly kicking in the air, while smothered cries came from his voice below.

The next moment the engine whirled round another corner, leaving the "Goody" twenty feet in the rear.

The street now entered was crowded with excited men, while the glare of a burning house sent its lurid flash far through the darkness of the night, lighting up the whole vicinity with the beacon-light of destruction.

"Make way there!" yelled the leader, as he rushed on without pausing to see if his order was obeyed.

The crowd fell back to right and left as the engine plunged onward, preceded by a light hose carriage, which had just then reached the scene of conflagration.

A few bounds more and the Industry came to a halt, while the firemen in their heavy coats and helmets rushed to their duties, some to aid in attaching the hose, some seizing axes and flying to the burning edifice, some preparing to work the pumps of the cumbersome machine.

Boots yet occupied his awkward position, little more of him than his leathern extremities being visible, his head being wedged fast somewhere

in the depths of the engine, from which he seemed vainly struggling to extricate himself.

Cries of entreaty, of anger, and of impatience came in smothered accents from his invisible lips.

With a loud laugh one of the firemen sprang upon the engine, caught him by the boots, and with a strong jerk extricated him from his awkward attitude, setting him on his feet with very little ceremony.

"Hallo! little Flippit! Where've you been all this time?" demanded the rescuer. "I kind of missed you."

Boots looked at him with a spiteful snap of his eyes, and then turned toward the rival company which had just arrived.

"Where's the feller as flung that brick?" he shouted. "I bet that coon's got cross-eyes and a bull-frog mouth. Jist p'int the bow-legged monkey out to me so's I kin make hash o' him. I'm goin' to lick that galoot till he wouldn't sell for a rotten apple at auction."

They were all too busy now to pay much attention to Boots's indignation. He gave vent to another growl which was cut short by the man who had rescued him.

"Cork your pipe!" cried the latter, sharply. "Down with you, youngster, or you'll be churned into mincemeat."

He caught the boy by the collar and dropped him unceremoniously into the street.

In a minute more the firemen had sprang to the handles of the engine, and were rattling them up and down with the full strength of twenty pairs of vigorous arms, while the stream of water from the attached hose began to swell out the leathern tubes leading to the burning house.

In another minute a stream was directed upon the fire, which gave out a spiteful hiss as it felt the first touch of the liquid fingers of its deadly foe.

Boots was too full of life to stand still while such exciting events were in progress. He considered himself one of the most important members of the "Indy" fire company, and was bound to bear a full hand in the labor.

He wormed his way through the dense crowd with the agility of a weasel till he reached the front of the house.

It was a three-story brick, standing alone, there being a wide alley on either side.

Flames were pouring in torrents from the third floor windows, while a dense cloud of smoke, lit by lurid gleams, rolled from the windows of the second floor.

Firemen were rushing into and out of the building, ladders were raised against the house, and men with axes and hose were climbing up to the windows.

With the quickness of a rat Boots plunged into the burning house and disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE DOOMED HOUSE.

WE must go back an hour or two in our story to consider some events which preceded the scene just described.

Then the house which we have just seen bursting into flames stood dark and quiet, with no indication of its coming fate.

It was a large and highly respectable brick edifice, standing alone, as we have said, being separated by five feet wide alleys from the other buildings on the street.

The windows were curtained, the shutters partly bowed, and not a ray of light indicated that there was any life within.

In fact the occupants of the house at that moment consisted of two persons only, and they were seated in a rear room on the third floor, the lamp which burned on the table between them sending its light only out into the rear yard.

These men were greatly contrasted in appearance. One of them was a handsome, well-built gentlemanly person, with a frank countenance, yet a look as if he would be able to hold his own in any difficulty that called for decisive action.

The other was a spare, wiry individual, with a bony face, whose most noticeable feature was a pair of sharp, ferrety eyes. His thin lips wore a smile which was not a very agreeable one.

These persons had apparently been engaged in a long and exciting conversation.

"My dear Benson," said the handsome-faced man, "don't take into your cranium the idea that I am denying anything, or that I am playing in any way a double game. I have the document. You did not fancy that I was fool enough to get rid of it?"

"I have no doubt it is your game to say so," replied Benson, in a satirical tone. "But this matter is a little too important to take any man's word for it. You have been a roving

blade, John Huntly. I doubt very much whether you have held fast to a useless piece of paper."

"Then you would like to see it?"

"That would be the easiest way to satisfy me."

"Would it?" rejoined Huntly, with a scornful laugh. "Then I am afraid you are not going to be satisfied. I can tell you this, it is in my possession at this moment. But there is only one condition under which you can see it."

"What is that?"

"That you tell me what you did with the boy."

"I have told you that already. He is dead. He died ten years ago."

"You lie," answered Huntly, harshly, fixing his eyes keenly on the sharp face of his opponent. "You lie, and you dare not deny it. And if you consider that an insult I am ready to give you any satisfaction."

"You are, are you?" rejoined Benson, with a sullen sneer. "You are twice my size, and you think you are safe to quarrel with me."

"My fighting is done on the square, and yours on the foul, so that makes you quite my match," was the disdainful answer. "I am not here to quarrel, though, but simply to tell you a thing or two. I say that you lie when you say the boy is dead. He is alive, and I know it. Produce him and I will quickly prove to you that I still hold the document."

"Will you put it into my possession?"

"Not much. It will be yours on the day when you undo the evil you have done, and restore that estate to its rightful heir."

"Suppose I claim that I have done nothing wrong, and that the estate is justly mine?"

"I will make you squeal, that's all. I know where to put a certain little scrap of paper where it will do the most good. I have only one thing further to say, Phil Benson. If you try any of your tricks on me you will find that you've waked up the wrong customer. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Benson answered him with a loud laugh. He rose from his seat and slapped him with a show of heartiness on the shoulder.

"You're the same old Jack Huntly, I see that," he remarked. "Straight up to the mark always, and not a twist in your composition. Well, I am ready to settle in any reasonable way, as long as you are so confounded contrary. But this is a dry talk between two old friends. Suppose we wet our lips before we go any further."

He walked towards a closet at one side of the room. Opening this he took from it a bottle and a brace of glasses, with a covert movement of his hand over one of the glasses.

Returning to the table he placed these articles upon it.

"You used to be fond of a glass of old cognac, Jack," he said pleasantly, "and this is seven years old. Let's wet our whistle and see if we can't get on without quarreling."

Huntly looked with an air of dry suspicion at the bottle.

"I am not in the humor for drinking," he said.

"That's a new tune with you, my boy. Very well, I'll have to drink alone to the old days."

He poured himself out a wine-glass of the strong liquor, and sipped it down with a show of great satisfaction.

Huntly watched him with less suspicion in his eyes.

"To return to that paper," remarked Benson quietly. "Between you and me I don't think it of much importance, but would not object to paying a reasonable price for it."

"To make a false will is an every-day business, of course," sneered Huntly. "To forge a man's name is what everybody is doing every day, no doubt. And yet, somehow, our courts have an odd way of looking at that sort of thing."

"Forgery be shot!" rejoined Benson, with a light laugh. "Never say anything you can't prove, my friend. Men like me never leave an open track behind them."

He poured out another glass of the brandy, which he slowly sipped as he fixed his eyes on Huntly's face with a smile of concealed insolence.

Huntly looked at him angrily. An oath of impatience broke from his lips. With a hasty movement he snatched up the bottle and poured out a glassful of the liquor.

"Anyhow, there is no poison in this," he remarked in an insulting tone. "And, by Jupiter! I would not have trusted you without making you drink first."

"I would hardly have treated an old friend

that way," declared Benson, smoothly, as his visitor quickly emptied the glass to its dregs.

Huntly looked up with renewed suspicion.

"Hillo!" he cried. "You are trying that innocent dodge on me, are you? Is there anything in that brandy, you villain? It has an ugly taste."

"If there is I am doubly in for it," rejoined Benson, as he finished his glass. "I have taken a double dose. And my head was never as strong as yours."

"But you are such a deep rascal that one never knows when to trust you."

"Here's to the old days again, at any rate," laughed Benson, filling his glass once more. "I'd drown myself in brandy before I'd talk that way to an old friend."

They continued to converse in a desultory manner, the momentary suspicion passing from Huntly's face.

Benson sat back in his chair, glass in hand, his eyes fixed with a curious gaze on his companion.

After a few minutes Huntly ceased to speak. There was a drowsy, glazed look in his eyes. His fingers drummed in a nervous manner on the table.

He roused himself with a sudden effort.

"What ails me?" he cried. "Was that liquor dosed, after all? By Heaven! if you try any game on me, you rascal, there will a pair of us kick the bucket together."

He drew a revolver from his pocket, and laid it on the table, fixing his eyes fiercely on the smiling countenance before him.

"If I go under, I will not cross the river alone," he declared, cocking the weapon.

"I am afraid that brand of cognac is too strong for your head," replied Benson. "I had better put away the bottle before it upsets your wits."

He took up the bottle and glasses, and walked back with them to the closet. Huntly followed him with a doubtful gaze. But the next instant his head drooped again, and the glazed look returned to his eyes.

Benson fumbled about the closet while covertly watching him. There was an ugly smile upon his face.

In a minute more Huntly's chin fell upon his breast, his eyes closed, and his arms dropped helplessly by his side.

"The fool!" sneered Benson, with the look of a tiger. "To trust himself alone with me! He has not wit enough to know that a glass may be guilty and a bottle innocent. The idiot has put himself in my power, and I will have that document if I have to search every inch of his clothing. I am never for a moment safe while that awkward paper is in existence."

He returned to the table and removed from it the revolver which had fallen from Huntly's nerveless grasp. Then he looked sharply into the face of the sleeping man. He even caught him by the shoulder and shook him, calling him by name.

Only a groan came in response. Huntly was fully under the influence of the drug which had been placed in his glass.

"Safe!" muttered Benson. "Now for the paper."

The search which ensued was a most complete and thorough one. The promise to search every inch of the sleeping man's clothing was fully kept. From head to foot he was examined in the most thorough manner, the lining of his clothes and the soles of his shoes not being neglected.

Yet nothing was discovered. Finally Benson desisted from the search.

"He lied!" came in hissing accents from his lips. "It is not about his person. He may have left it elsewhere. But what if he has? No one but he knows the meaning of it, and he is not the man to put his game in any other man's hands."

A look of strange meaning came into his eyes as he continued to gaze on the helpless sleeper.

"One thing will make me safe, and one only!" he hissed. "While John Huntly lives I will be always in danger. If he were out of the way I would fear no man. He is in my power. Shall I be fool enough to let him escape?"

He continued his gaze, while the gleam in his eyes grew fiendish. Hastily starting from his constrained position he hurried to the closet. In a moment he emerged with some pieces of strong twine, with which he proceeded to bind his victim firmly to the chair.

This done he walked to the door of the room, pausing but for a single glance back.

"While he lives I am on the edge of a precipice," he hissed. "If I do not push him over he will push me. John Huntly shall never be heard of again."

He left the room, locking the door behind him.

An hour passed by. Huntly still lay in his swoon. At the end of a half-hour more he showed signs of wakefulness. His eyes opened. His limbs stirred. He endeavored to rise.

It was a vain effort; he was firmly bound to his chair.

But his opening eyes had fallen upon a frightful spectacle. Here and there tongues of flame were darting through the floor. A stifling heat filled the room. Clouds of smoke rolled upward.

There could be no question of his terrible peril. The house was on fire, and he was left there, tied hand and foot, to perish in the flames.

The strong man struggled with the vigor of a giant. But he did so in vain. His bonds were too strong to be broken by his utmost efforts.

He lay back and groaned in agony. The flames were within an inch of his person.

"Fool and idiot as I was!" he cried out. "To put myself alone in that man's reach! I am but paid as I deserve for my folly."

Yet a lingering source of hope remained. There came to his ears from the street the roar as of a multitude of men. Bells were ringing, shouts rising, the hiss of water mingled with the roar of the flames.

Yet there seemed no hope for him. A wall of fire shot up between him and the window. Tongues of flame lapped the door. His clothing caught fire.

At that instant the sound of an ax was heard. The door flew open.

"No one in there," cried a fireman's voice. "That room is past hope."

He turned away, while the doomed man fell back with a hollow groan.

CHAPTER III.

THROUGH SMOKE AND FLAME.

Outside the burning house a half-dozen engines and hose carriages had collected, and others were momentarily dashing up to the scene.

Hundreds of people were crowding into the adjoining streets so closely as to greatly impede the efforts of the firemen. But the latter used very little ceremony in making their way through the curious throng.

The flames were momentarily climbing higher and sending a broader glare over the midnight scene. As yet the water had very little effect over its ancient foe.

We left Boots just rushing into the burning building.

Inside the doorway he ran plump against a stout fireman, who had entered an instant before.

Glancing down at the comical figure by his side the burly fellow caught him by the collar with an oath.

"What brings you here, you bottle-stopper? Git out with you now, 'fore I kick you out!"

"Like ter know what fatches you here," retorted Boots. "Guess if you've got a front seat, I kin squat in the peanut gallery."

"Drop your jaw, you Jack on a stick, and git! Lively, I tell you."

"Dunno how I'm goin' to git while you're a-holdin' me. Le' go my collar now 'fore I bite."

"Slide, you ring-tailed monkey," snarled the fireman, releasing his squirming captive. "Don't show your dirty face here ag'in. If you do I'll fling you in the engine, and shoot you out through the nozzle."

"Got to ketch yer weasel 'fore you kin skin him," retorted Boots, with a laugh of scorn. "I run with the Indy, I do, and if you was put up at auction I wouldn't giv a board off a pig-pen fur your whole corporation."

He made a dart into the house. The fireman stepped hastily forward to stop him. But the boy was right in comparing himself with a weasel. With a sharp turn he darted between the legs of his opponent, nearly upsetting him in the effort.

An oath like a peal of thunder rolled from the fireman's lips, but it was wasted on the active urchin, who was already clattering up the stairs with his heavy boots.

Reaching the floor of the second story he found himself in a dense cloud of smoke, while the heat was stifling. Yet a dozen firemen were there, some in the adjoining rooms, where clear flame had taken the place of smoke, some breaking open the doors of apartments as yet free from the demon of fire.

Where Boots stood no one could have survived more than a minute or two. The smoke was smothering.

He darted blindly forward in search of purer

air, and quickly found himself at the foot of another flight of stairs.

The form of a fireman was visible near the top of the stairs. Boots plunged up after him.

When about half-way up he heard the loud stroke of an ax, and the splintering of wood as a door was dashed open.

A glare of flames broke out into the hall, lighting up the scene with startling brilliancy.

"No one in there," cried the fireman as he dashed onward. "That room is past hope."

Yet a sound came to the ears of the boy which had escaped the fireman, a sort of smothered groan.

It was followed by a cry for help, that was half lost in the roar of the fire.

Boots, who had paused in his speed, started forward at these sounds with the agility of a cat.

"If there ain't nobody in there then I don't know beans from 'taters," he muttered.

In an instant he reached the door of the room. There was not a second to lose. The flames were gaining more and more the mastery of the doomed house.

Just inside the door a line of flames seemed to cut off the interior of the room. Toward the window was a glaring background of fire. The heat was stifling.

But in the center of this realm of flames was a spectacle that gave Boots such a start as he had never before experienced.

In a chair sat the forms of a heavily-built man, whose ghastly, horror-stricken face gleamed out with ghostly distinctness from the flames.

Another loud cry for help at that instant came from his lips.

"What you yellin' fur? Why don't you jump up an' peg out o' that?" demanded Boots.

"It is impossible. I am bound hand and foot, and left to perish in the burning house. Help! Help!"

"The by stin' blue blazes!" ejaculated Boots. "Here goes fur you, then."

A wild spring took him over the line of fire. In a moment he was by the side of the bound man. The clothes of the latter were already on fire in several places, and the cords that bound him were burning.

Boots felt hastily for his knife. A quick jerk severed the bonds, and with wild haste the boy tore off the loosened strands.

"Quick!" he cried. "The blood is b'ilin' inside me. I'm goin' to skip 's if ther were ten perlicemen arter me."

He darted back to the door, followed by Huntly, who sprung from his chair and staggered rather than ran after his active guide.

His clothes were burning in four or five places, but they were woven of thick and firm woolen stuff that burned with difficulty.

He stumbled over the line of flames and reached the hall. Fortunately, at that moment, a stream of water from one of the engines struck him full in the face, and poured down over his body and limbs.

He had been staggering in a faint, blind manner, but this refreshing fluid cooled his scorched flesh, and gave him new vigor.

The fire in his clothing was extinguished. "Them's jolly papers!" cried Boots. "Gimme some o' that."

He thrust his head into the cooling stream, letting the water pour in torrents over him.

"Fu'st chop!" cried Boots, delightedly. "But 'tain't no time now ter stop fur shower baths. This yere house is a dead-goner, and we'd best git."

Catching Huntly's hand, he dragged him hastily forward toward the stairs.

Down these they drove at full speed to the second floor.

Here they found the smoke less thick and blinding than it had been on his ascent. But the flames were gaining every minute more and more of the mastery.

The firemen had all vanished. The main flight of stairs was burning at every point, there being a terrible gush of flame at the summit.

Escape by this route seemed impossible. The fugitives turned irresolutely away, with the hope of escaping by the windows.

But a glance showed them that that hope was illusory. A sea of fire was roaring in the rooms, over which nothing living could have passed.

"It's the stairs or nothin'," yelled Boots. "Foller me!"

A quick spring took him over the fire at the top, and landed him half-way down the flight.

Without hesitation Huntly followed him, landing on his feet beside him.

But the feat which had been performed by the

light boy with safety proved a fatal one to the heavy man.

As his feet struck the stairs they quivered, bent, yielded—slowly at first, but with increasing rapidity. In an instant more the whole stairway, burnt from its supports both at top and bottom, gave way beneath the weight of its occupants, and plunged downward with a terrible surge.

Down, down, it went, in a gush of blinding flames, plunging through the floor and into the cellar below, while a sea of fire roared up through the cavity it had left.

And down with it went the daring boy and the man he had rescued from bonds and flames.

His effort had been in vain. The fire was victor. The fugitives seemed lost beyond hope of redemption.

Over their fallen forms the flames surged up with a roar of victory.

While these events were proceeding inside the house the activity outside had in no sense diminished. The firemen were working with redoubled vigor, sending hissing streams of water into every window of the burning building.

Several of the companies, however, had given that edifice up as a hopeless task, and were directing their attention to the neighboring buildings, in an effort to prevent the fire from spreading.

"No use wasting any more water there," cried one red-shirted fellow. "Let it alone. The sooner it burns itself out the better."

"There go the stairs," cried another, as a roar and a blinding surge of flames succeeded.

"Is there anybody inside?"

"Reckon not. 'Cept he's a salamander."

"You bet there is, then," yelled a man, who at that instant darted out through the open door.

"Two fellows went down with them stairs. I saw them."

A groan of horror rose at this startling information.

"Sure on't? Who were they? Firemen?"

"No. One was a man, t'other a boy. Looked like that little gutter-rat they call Boots."

A yell rose from the "Indy" firemen on hearing this. Boots had long been a favorite with them. With haste the stream from the nozzle through the cellar windows, in the vain hope of in some way benefiting the doomed boy.

Vigorously as they had worked the handles before, they did so with tenfold strength and rapidity now, while the water poured in a torrent from their swollen hose.

But it was evidently useless. The flames swelled in volume with fierce rapidity.

They were now pouring in a flood from the roof. In five minutes afterward the upper floor fell in with a crash, carrying down the one below it.

Almost the same instant the upper half of the rear wall toppled inward and dropped with a thundering crash upon the floors below, hurling them in a blazing mass into the cellar.

The last hope was now gone. The brave boy and the rescued victim of villainy seemed lost beyond recovery. Only their scorched bones could now be sought in the ashes of the ruined edifice.

CHAPTER IV.

THROUGH FIRE AND WATER.

ON the skirts of the throng that had gathered to gaze upon the burning house stood the spare figure of Philip Benson, crouching back in a shadowy corner as if afraid that his murderous deed might be revealed in his face.

He listened eagerly to every word that was said, gloating inwardly as he learned that the fire had spread beyond control, and that the efforts of the firemen were useless.

"Jack Huntly will never cross my path again," he muttered. "For the first time in ten years I feel safe."

As if drawn by some horrible fascination, he glided step by step toward the house. He strove to cling to the pavement with his feet, and to hold himself back, but the attraction was too strong for his will, and drew him onward in spite of himself.

Through the crowd he wormed his way, until he found himself in front of the mansion to which his own hand had applied the torch. His face was now scorched with the fire he had kindled, and he found it impossible to remove his eyes from the whirling and eddying sheets of flame.

He seemed to see in them the face of John Huntly. From every whisp of flame this face looked out, distorted with agony, yet glaring on him with eyes full of revengeful fire.

The superstitious villain, scared in every fiber of his frame, put both hands to his face to shut

out the frightful spectacle, and groaned aloud in his terror.

"Hello, governor, what's wrong with you?" cried a good-natured fireman, giving him a shake. "'Tain't your house, is it? What's the use o' whimperin', anyhow?"

"Is it sure to burn down? Can't it be saved?" asked Benson, eagerly.

"If you ain't got it insured you best run right off and git it done, that's all I got to say."

The face of the villain was white as chalk when he drew down his hands.

"But—but," he stammered, "was there anybody in the house? Are the people saved? Are they all out?"

There was a horrible suggestion in his face as he glared eagerly at the fireman.

"Hello, old hoss, what you lookin' at a feller that way fur? Ain't got the colic in your stomach, have ye? I'm 'feard there was a chap inside. When the floors went down he was seen to drop through inter the cellar."

"Is there no hope for him? Can he not be saved?"

"Don't want to hurt yer feelings, but if he's any kin o' yourn you'd best say your prayers for him. I don't s'pose there's nothin' left but bones."

"You lie!" broke out Benson, with a wild yell, carried out of his senses by his fears.

"There he is! Don't you see him? That is his face in the fire! Look how he glares on me! Oh! save me, save me—save me from his vengeance!"

He broke away and dashed at full speed through the crowd, his eyes glaring like those of a madman, and cries of terror bursting from his lips.

A hundred eyes looked after him in surprise. The fireman touched his hand significantly to his head.

"He's gone here," he remarked, meaningly. "Thought so when I first see'd him. Be'n on a tear, I reckon, and got snakes in his coffee."

The sturdy men around him, however, had too much on hand to long heed the vagaries of a madman. They continued to pour water on the flames in hissing torrents.

Now that the woodwork of the house had fallen in the fire began to yield to the liquid streams. The flames diminished in volume, and clouds of white smoke and steam rose densely into the air.

"Poor little Boots," remarked one of the boys of the Indy. "We won't never have him dance heel and toe fur us ag'in. He's gone under."

"Got to give him a funeral, anyhow," replied another. "I s'pose we can pick out enough of his bones to make some sort o' show in a coffin."

"If we can only save his boots, it will be something," broke in an unsentimental fellow. "We can put them in a glass case in the engine house, and write on it a graveyard sign: 'Here lies poor Boots!'"

"You lie yerself. Nobody never cotched Boots in a lie."

These words, in the well-known voice of the lost boy, seemed to come out of the ground beneath their feet.

Every one present sprung back as if a ghost had appeared in their midst. They stood with fixed and frightened eyes, looking strangely at one another and at the ground beneath them.

"Ain't goin' ter leave me here to be drowned, are ye? Bad 'nough fur a chap to git fricaseed. Jist shot off the water, 'kaze it's risin' here an inch a minit."

The astounded firemen darted forward again, and gazed eagerly down at the surface of the street, whence the voice seemed to rise.

They quickly perceived there, under the mud and dirt, an iron grating, the entrance to a coal vault.

All at first seemed dark below, but a surge of flame now sent its light through the grate, and the peering eyes caught a momentary glimpse of a small spare face.

"Is that you, Boots?"

"Reckon 'tain't my granddaddy."

"How did you get there?"

"Best ax how I'm goin' to git out o' here, if you want to talk sense."

"Hold your level. We'll soon yank you out."

Several of them thrust their fingers through the openings in the grate, and strove with all their strength to pull it up. The effort proved useless. It was too firmly fixed to yield.

"Hurry up, 'fore we're drowned or b'iled alive," cried Boots. "There's a pair o' us in here, and it's wuss nor bein' a rat in a rain-water hogshead!"

"A pickax! A wrench! Something, quick!" cried a dozen loud voices. "Tear up the grate. Rip up the street! We'll have Boots out or bust!"

In all directions they ran for implements, work on the Industry engine ceasing in the rush of this new excitement.

Members of other companies ran to the spot, and for the moment it seemed as if the fire would be forgotten, in the desire to rescue the owner of the voice under the street.

While they are thus occupied we must return to Boots and the man whom he had rescued from his perilous position, and follow them in their escape from the devouring flames.

When we last left them they were tumbling with the falling stairs into the cellar of the burning mansion.

The heavy mass broke its way through the charred floor and dropped in a heap to the cellar, flinging its occupants to the floor of the front part of this underground space.

The wet earth on which they fell was cool in comparison to the point from which they had just descended. Yet it was still of a scorching heat, while clouds of smoke rolled over their heads. No human being could have survived for five minutes in that situation.

But lying on the water-soaked floor as they were, the thickest of the smoke was above their heads. And fortunately the next minute a stream of water from the Indy hose poured in upon them, drenching them completely, and relieving the intense heat which seemed to boil the blood in their veins.

In a few minutes more the rear portion of the floor fell with a crash into the cellar. But the front timbers still held up and protected the fugitives from the crushing weight.

They occupied now a narrow space, as yet free from the flames, and cooled by the streams of water that descended there from all parts of the house.

The water gathered in that low spot indeed, until it was quickly a foot deep. Yet, though this liquid had protected them from the virulence of the flames, it was itself scorching hot, and only the cold stream from the Indy saved the fugitives from being boiled alive.

"We can't stand this," cried Huntly. "Something must be done. Three minutes more here will put an end to us."

"We're goin' to be burnt, b'iled or drowned, and we kin take our choice," rejoined Boots, glaring around him eagerly with his sharp eyes.

The spot had been darkened by the rolling smoke, but at that moment this partly cleared away, and the gleam of the flames brightly illuminated the whole space.

"Jolly papers!" cried Boots. "See yonder! Dive in, old boss!"

There was revealed by the blinding light a narrow opening in the cellar wall, closed just inside by a door. Boots darted against this and shoved it open. A broad cavity appeared beyond.

Dragging Huntly, who seemed partly stupefied, the lively urchin sprung into the open space, and closed the door behind him.

It fortunately fitted so closely as to keep out the greater part of the smoke. For the first time since their fall they could breathe with freedom.

But the water from the cellar had poured into this space until it now stood two feet in depth.

It was very hot. They could not have borne it under ordinary conditions, but they had grown accustomed to severe heat.

"Reckon this's a sort of a coal hole," surmised Boots, as he stumbled over the stony lumps that covered the floor. "And don't ye see the light for'ard there? That's where they puts the coal in, and where we're goin' to climb out. You bet I got both my boots full o' b'ilin' water."

Mr. Huntly made some vague answer. He seemed nearly overcome by the effect of the heat and the smoke.

"Ain't goin' to cave in now?" demanded Boots in alarm. "Don't drap down, 'kaze if you do, it'll be all up with you. Guv me yer flapper. Let's dig for'ard."

Catching his comrade's hands, the brave little fellow led him forward to the grate, which occupied the outer edge of the pavement, and through which the gleam of light came down.

The water was momentarily rising higher and growing hotter, and it seemed as if they would yet be drowned or scalded to death.

Resting his exhausted companion against the outer wall of the cavity Boots looked eagerly upward through the grate.

The noise of the engines reached his ears, and he could see the shadows of men in busy motion. The voices of persons in conversation quickly followed.

Great as was the peril the daring boy could not avoid the desire to indulge in chaff, when he found that he was the subject of their conversation.

The scene which we have above described followed. There passed hardly a minute, however, from the time of the boy's first remark to the hasty search of the firemen for implements.

In a minute more the iron grate was fiercely attacked with axes and crowbars.

"Let up on that ax business," cried one stalwart fellow. "I've got a purchase on it with this bar. Lend a hand one or two of you, and we'll yank it out in a jiffy."

Three pairs of strong hands grasped the extremity of the bar, while the axmen fell back.

A fierce surge, a rending sound, and the grate with its surrounding stones gave way, so suddenly as to fling the workmen to the ground.

But they had gained their end. A broad opening yawned in the pavement. The face of the imprisoned boy appeared just below. One of the Indy lads stooped down, caught him by the arms, and lifted him bodily through the narrow aperture.

"Gay and happy!" cried Boots, breaking into a lively dance. "We're the coons, now you bet. Dig down ag'in. Ther's another feller in there, that's a'most pegged out."

The form of Mr. Huntly was plainly visible, supported by the wall, yet to all appearance in a senseless condition.

Lying down, the man who had rescued Boots managed to grasp the arm of his insensible companion. Another fireman assisted him, and between them they managed to lift Huntly to the level of the opening.

Other hands were now thrust downward, and in a minute more the inanimate man was safely lifted to the street, being dragged through a hole that appeared too small to let his body pass.

Benson's murderous scheme had fallen through, his victim had escaped, and the two imperiled fugitives were safe once more in the open air.

CHAPTER V.

AN ENGINE-HOUSE FROLIC.

WE must pass rapidly over the month that succeeded the scene of the fire. Of the two fugitives from the flames, whose narrow escape we have chronicled, both are still to some extent in the invalid state.

Mr. Huntly was seriously burned, and greatly affected by the action of the smoke and flames. His life was at first despaired of, and he is still under the doctor's hands, though now rapidly recovering.

Boots is nearly himself again. In spite of his courage, he had been so burned and scalded that after the momentary excitement of his escape he had fallen into a swoon, which ended in a high fever.

For weeks he had been delirious, during which interval he raved about his boots, as if those precious articles constituted the whole subject of his thoughts.

His young blood and naturally hardy health carried him at length past this state of danger, and at the period we have now reached the boy was himself again—the same jolly, irrepressible, impudent young rogue as of old.

While Mr. Huntly occupied a room in a neighboring boarding-house, Boots, who had no place that he could call home, had been taken into the engine-house, where he was cared for as tenderly by the firemen as if they had been trained nurses.

The boy was a favorite with them all, and his late exploit had made him a young hero in their eyes.

Boots was not likely to be left to suffer while the "Indy" engine boys kept up their organization.

"Whar's my boots?" he called out, one morning at the end of the period mentioned. "I'm tired o' goin' barefooted. 'Tain't 'spectable."

"What do you want with boots, you little donkey?" demanded Joe Bunting, one of the firemen. "Here's a pair of slippers. That's what sick folks have got to be broke in with before they can come to boots."

"Who's sick folks, I'd like to know?" queried Boots, indignantly. "Don't ax me to swaller no sich gammon as that. Bet you I kin stand on my head longer nor any feller here!"

The youngster tried this evolution in his bunk, with with very ill success. He tumbled in a heap on his back, while a loud laugh from all present chronicled his failure.

"It's jist 'cause you ain't been half-feedin' me," declared the undaunted youngster. "A feller can't 'spect to play circus on spoon vittals. Anyhow I want you to fotch them boots here

so's I kin see 'em. I'm 'feard some galoot 'll be stealin' 'em."

To quiet the young invalid one of the firemen brought in his boots, which had been carefully kept among the keepsakes of the engine-house.

They were more dilapidated than ever, from the soaking and scorching they had gone through, yet the boy gazed at them with eyes full of affection.

"Reckon I'll have to stuff 'em with some new straw," he muttered. "T'other's played out. Ain't none o' you fellers goin' to grease 'em up fur a chap?"

They certainly needed it, and Joe Bunting good-naturedly undertook to give them a good coating of grease, the boy looking on with delighted eyes.

"That's hokey!" he cried. "Them's boots as is boots. You bet I'm goin' ter have 'em on to-morrer."

It was a week, however, before he was able to perform the head-standing act, and the firemen would not let him resume his boots until he had reached this point of convalescence.

It was a happy day when he reached this stage. Stuffing the boots with straw until they reasonably fitted his feet, he fastened ropes to the straps and hitched them over the shoulders. Without this device he might as well have tried to wear flat-boats on his feet.

A regular jollification in the engine-house followed. The fire lads lifted Boots to a chair that stood on the head of a hogshead, and dubbed him master of ceremonies.

A fiddler occupied a similar throne at the other end of the room and rattled out the gayest of dancing tunes from his well-stretched strings.

All between broke into a lively dance, yelling, capering, and flinging their heels, until it seemed as if the floor would break through under their weight.

"Let her rip!" yelled Boots, in an ecstasy of delight. "Swing corners! Heel and toe! Bu'st yer collars! Pile in, Indies! Let her slide!"

He continued to yell and they to dance until the whole neighborhood rung with the uproar.

Finally Boots sprung from his chair, kicked it over among the wild dancers, and began a break-down on the top of his circular throne with as much vim as the liveliest man on the floor.

Any one entering at that moment would have supposed them a party of lunatics, or of men full of wine. They were, in fact, intoxicated with excitement, and Boots more so than them all.

His heavy boots rung like hammers on the resounding top of the hogshead, which kept time like a base-drum with the music of the violin.

"Hurra for the Indies!" he shouted, flinging his hat in the air.

"We're the boys as fears no noise, and never cries to go home."

At that instant there came a loud crash and the excited urchin suddenly disappeared from sight. The top of the hogshead had given way beneath his weight, and tumbled in, letting the wild young dancer drop through in a heap.

A roar of laughter at Boots's misfortune went up from every part of the room. In an instant a group of the rough fellows sprung to the hogshead, overturned it, and began to roll it in all directions over the floor, heedless of the yells of the youthful prisoner.

For five minutes this horse-play continued, though some of the soberer members of the company tried to put a stop to it.

Finally Boots rolled out like a sack of potatoes from his awkward prison, none the worse for wear, and laughing as if he had been through the most delightful experience.

"Jolly papers, them is," he shouted. "Can't discount Boots that style. I'm all Indy rubber, I am. I'm on the bounce, every time."

The wild sport which we have described continued until midnight, though Boots declined to take a seat on the other end of the hogshead, to which he had been invited.

"That was jolly fun," he declared, "but one dose's enough for one night."

On the second day after that of the dancing frolic Boots went to see Mr. Huntly, at the request of the latter.

He found his companion in misfortune very much better. The invalid was still weak, pale and thin but he was rapidly improving, and promised to have his old strength back in a week or two more.

"I am ever so glad to see you, my brave young rescuer," he declared, grasping Boots's hand in a warm pressure, and looking gratefully

into his face. "Only for your courage and good sense I would have died a dreadful death. Do not think that I shall forget the debt I owe you."

"Oh, drop all that gammon!" cried Boots, perching himself in a chair opposite his new friend. "It were a narrer squeak, I'll guv in to that. But I was only lookin' arter my own hide, and I'd ha' been a hog not to let you come 'long."

Mr. Huntly looked him in the face with an amused smile.

"That's your way of looking at it, then? Well, it isn't mine. See here, my boy, are you ready to answer me a few questions?"

"So you don't ax me what I'm goin' ter have fur to-morrer's dinner. Try an' hit somethin' easier nor that."

"All right. Let me see if I can't suit your ideas. In the first place, do you remember how you found me in that room?"

"Tied fast to a chair. Didn't tie yerself, did you?"

"I hope you haven't talked about this. I would prefer to keep it a secret."

"Dunno as I've let it out," replied Boots. "Been out o' my head most o' the time since, and the fellers say I talked more 'bout my boots than anything else."

"By the way, how come you to wear those ridiculous boots? Why don't you get a pair o' shoes? Throw them away and I will buy you shoes."

"Throw 'em away!" cried the boy, springing indignantly to his feet. "Not much, if the court knows herself. If you ax me ag'in ter git rid o' them boots I'll cut you off o' my visitin'-card."

"You certainly don't set any store by a pair of worn-out men's boots?"

"Ain't half-wore out," answered Boots stoutly. "What's more, them's all my dad left me when he kicked the bucket. He said I was to wear them boots, and I been a-wearin' 'em ever since. I'm a-goin' to stick to 'em till they tumble apart."

"Your father is dead, then, and you have inherited his boots," said Mr. Huntly, with a look of interest. "Is your mother living?"

"Never had no mother!" answered Boots.

"What?"

"Never as I knowed on, anyhow. S'pose I mought had one somewhere away back."

"But you have relations?"

"Nary one."

"You have a home, at all events?"

"I bunk round the engine-house cold nights. When it's warm, I sleeps out. Gits my grub wherever it's handy. I ain't a bit proud or sassy."

"Poor little waif," remarked Mr. Huntly, with a pitying look. "You certainly need somebody to look after you. I am not the wealthiest man in the world myself, but what I have I am ready to share with my preserver."

"Reckon I kin git along," declared Boots, independently. "Ain't out on a beggin' scout, nary time."

"If you have nothing else, you have a name. What is it?"

"Boots is what everybody calls me. Ain't heered no other name fur a year."

"But you have a name?"

"Dad's name was Johnson. Jerry Johnson they called him when he was sober, and Old Jerry when he was drunk. Dan was what he used ter call me. Dan Johnson I s'pose's my name."

Mr. Huntly made no reply for full a minute. He had fixed his eyes on the intelligent face of the boy with a strange gaze, as if he was looking for something there that was not easily to be recognized. Something in the name seemed to have struck him with surprise.

Boots soon grew uneasy under this intent scrutiny.

"Guess I'll be gittin'," he declared, springing from his chair. "Don't b'lieve you're as well as you was."

Mr. Huntly seemed to break with an effort from his secret thoughts.

"Don't go," he replied. "I have something more to say to you. First, you must promise not to speak to any one of the way you found me in the burning house."

"Jist as you say," answered Boots. "I kin keep a secret with the next feller."

"Next, I want you to do something private and important for me."

"I'm on hand, if 'tain't too heavy."

"There is a man watching this house. He is a middle-size, spare, thin-faced person, with sharp eyes, and without beard or mustache. He is dressed in a reddish-brown suit, with a sack-

coat and silk hat. He wears a blue necktie, with a small diamond pin. Do you think you could recognize him from this description?"

"I could try."

"Very well. I want you to keep a secret watch on that man and follow him to his home. When you find out where he lives, come to me for further instructions. Do you understand?"

"You bet. I'd be a donkey if I didn't."

Five minutes afterward Boots left his new friend.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE TRACK OF A SECRET.

Two days afterward Boots called again on the invalid. He found Mr. Huntly looking much better and more like himself than on the former visit. But the boy was too full of his own business to pay much attention to this.

"I've twigg'd him," he declared eagerly. "Got him down fine. See'd him sneakin' past here like a sly old fox. You bet I follered him."

"Are you sure it was the right person? Did he answer to my description?"

"Dunno how he answered, 'ka'ze I didn't ax him nothin'. But Joe Buntin', of the injine house, see'd him, too, and he says he's the same chap as come round, the night o' the fire, stark crazy, and actin' 's if he'd jist murdered somebody."

"Ha! I heard of this before. That is the man. You tracked him to his home, then?"

"Reckon I didn't do nothin' shorter. I axed all about it, too. It's a sort o' high-toned boardin' house, down Spruce street. One of them 'ristocratic places where they guvs them dried apples for breakfast and cold water for dinner, and lets 'em swell up for supper."

Mr. Huntly laughed heartily at his description. He was more like himself again than he had been since the night of the fire.

"Listen to me, Boots," he said. "I take it that you are a wide-awake, sharp-witted boy, and I have something for you to do that will need your sharpest wits."

"I'm yer boss," answered Boots, confidently. "I dunno as I'm so smart, but I wouldn't 'vise anybody to buy me fur a fool, 'ka'ze they mought git cheated."

"Sit still then for a minute and let me talk. What I am going to say may prove to your advantage for all the rest of your life. If I reveal to you an important secret can I depend upon your silence?"

"Maybe you'd best not. I mought be leaky. Ain't bad at holdin' my tongue, but sometimes it git's loose."

"I think I can trust you," answered Mr. Huntly, with a smile. "I want to tell you why I was tied in my chair and left to be burned to death in that house."

"That's jist what I've been wantin' ter know ever since."

"It was done by the man you have just seen, Philip Benson. He got me to drink drugged liquor, and while I was insensible he tied me fast and set fire to the house."

"What for?" demanded Boots, eagerly.

"Because I knew him to be a scoundrel, and might force him to yield up his ill-gotten property, if not send him to prison. He drugged me to obtain a paper which he fancied I had about me. He was disappointed, for I had no such paper. He then tried to get rid of me, as a deadly foe."

"You don't mean to say as he tried to burn you up 'bout a bit o' paper? Well, that was rough!" declared Boots.

"It was a paper full of danger to him. But he was mistaken in one thing. I did not have that paper, though I made him believe so. In fact, he has it himself. It is in his own possession, though he is ignorant of the fact."

Boots could only whistle in his astonishment at this.

"He does not know he has it, or it would soon be given to the flames. Now, listen to me, boy. Since Phil Benson tried to murder me, I have sworn to be revenged on him. I see my way, clear to bring him to his deserts if I but had that paper. That I must and will have. And I want you to get it for me."

Boots whistled again. The plot was thickening.

"I know where it is, which he don't," continued Mr. Huntly. "Among his effects he has a small writing-desk, which once belonged to me. Do you know what a writing-desk is?"

"Reckon so," answered Boots, with an offended air. "A chap don't have to go to college to larn that much."

"This one is made of a handsome red wood, and the top inlaid with tortoise-shell and pearl.

It will be no trouble to find it if you get into his room. He told me that he still has it in use. But though he has used it for ten years there is a secret about it that he has never discovered."

"Must be a greeny," muttered Boots.

"Not at all. It is no open secret. The desk has a false bottom, yet there is nothing to indicate it. There is only one way of opening it, and Benson has not discovered that. That false bottom hides the paper which he would give half his life to gain possession of."

Boots listened now with the deepest interest. He had drawn himself to the edge of his chair, and sat with his feet perched on the rounds, and his chin in his hands, looking into Mr. Huntly's face with wide-open eyes.

"I am going to let you into the secret," continued the s eaker. "The only way to open it is to take the desk between your knees, and press with all your strength on the two ends. This way."

He took a box from the table, placed it between his knees, and pressed them upon it to show Boots what he meant.

"If you squeeze that way hard enough, you will see what seems to be the bottom of the box fly up. Under it will be revealed a flat folded paper. Take this out and conceal it about your person. Then release the pressure and the bottom will drop back again, and there will be nothing to show that it has ever been opened. Do you understand?"

"Well, I should smile. If I couldn't take that in, I wouldn't be fit fur a job o' 'tater diggin'."

"If you succeed in getting the paper you must hide it somewhere very securely. If Benson discovers you there and suspects your object, he will search you most thoroughly."

"Bet you high I countermarch on him," said Boots, confidently.

"How?"

The boy stooped down, slipped off one of his boots, and pressed with his thumb on the sole. It opened a crack, showing that the stitching had given way.

"That's my hidin'-place. He won't never think o' lookin' in there."

"I don't believe he will," rejoined Huntly, with more confidence. "Will you undertake the enterprise, then? I dare not attempt it myself. It will not do to rouse his suspicions. I must trust to somebody that can play cute and innocent."

"I'm yer boss," answered Boots.

"Very well. Now let me hear from you. What is your plan? How do you design to get into Mr. Benson's room?"

"Don't s'pose I'm a anaconda, do ye, with a box full o' plans to fit anywhere? I've been a-listenin'. Ain't been a-thinkin'. It mought take me a day, and it mought take me a week. Ain't goin' ter jump inter no frog-pond till I know where 'bouts the bottom is."

"Good for you, Boots! You are just the boy I want. Take all the time you need, and don't make a move till you are sure of your game. One thing more. Keep out of Benson's sight. Don't come here again. Or, if you have to come, you must be very secret about it. He must not see you entering this house."

"If I come it'll be after dark, and I'll leave my boots at home," answered the boy. "Nobody won't know me 'bout them."

"Good. Do you understand everything now?"

"Got it all down fine."

"Then get the landlady to let you out the back way. It might be dangerous for you to go out by the front door."

Boots obeyed the suggestion, and soon found himself in the street again, with his brain full of new projects and ideas.

For the next two days the boy spent most of his time in his bunk at the engine-house, busily thinking and plotting.

He was using all his brain power to devise some scheme to get into Philip Benson's room at his boarding-house, and have a half hour's spare time to work.

Yet nothing came of it. He devised fifty promising schemes, only to throw them overboard when he came to think them out. They were all too deep, and all had some defect that might prove fatal.

"What's the matter, Boots?" asked Joe Buntin'. "Ain't playing sick again?"

"Jist takin' a solid think. that's all."

"Think you could run if the fire-bells rung?"

"Try me. I reckon I'll be thar every time."

"Jump then, you cricket, for there they go!"

In fact, at that very moment a neighboring bell rung out its wild peal of alarm. The men in the engine-house hastened to get out their machine, Boots the most eager of the whole. They had not fairly done so ere other men

came running in, and in five minutes the Industry was whirling down the street.

The alarm proved a false one. There was no fire, and no excitement except a fight between two hostile companies, in which bricks flew freely, and more than one man measured his length on the pavement.

But nobody was seriously hurt, and only some bloody heads remained as testimony of the affray.

This event broke up Boots's thinking scheme. It was a waste of time, he could hit no promising plan, and he concluded to trust to chance to achieve his object.

He began to roam around the house on Spruce street, to which he had tracked his prey. For several days he continued this exercise, watching every one who went in or came out, and trying to form an opinion of their characters.

"That gal as tends on the door is a stupid-lookin' critter," he said, reflectively. "Don't b'lieve it'd take much trouble to work a gum game on her. But I can't think o' nothin'. Never was so empty-headed in my life afore."

He had particularly watched the movements of Mr. Benson, noting his hours of entering and leaving the house, and trying to get some idea of his general habits.

This personage proved very irregular in his movements, yet could be counted on to be absent two or three hours at each time he left the house.

It took Boots a full week to get thus far in his enterprise. During that time he had been acting the part of a bootblack, taking a stand nearly opposite the house in question, and plying his vocation with great industry.

At the end of the week he had made up his mind what to do.

Giving up all his deep-laid schemes as unworkable, he concluded to try one of the simplest plans that had come into his mind.

He no sooner decided on the scheme than he proceeded to put it into execution. Waiting till Mr. Benson had gone out one afternoon, the bold boy walked up to the door and rung the bell with the utmost assurance.

He had his boot-blackening box still strung over his shoulder.

The stupid-looking girl whose mental caliber he had been measuring opened the door, and stood looking at the odd visitor with surprise and a show of disdain.

"This where Mr. Benson lives—Mr. Philip Benson?" asked Boots.

"Yes; but he is out. He won't be in for an hour or two."

"That's what he said. He come to me at my stand t'other side the street. S'pose you've seen me there. He told me to wait for him till he come in."

"You? Wait for him?"

"Jist so. 'Scuse me, miss. Don't like to keep a pretty gal like you talkin' to a ragged chap like me. But he's gaged me as a sort o' errand boy. Says I'm too big fur boot-blackin', and I'm to wait in his room till he comes back."

The girl looked at boots from head to foot, her eyes opening wide.

"Why, you'd be a disgrace to the house," she cried. "He must be crazy."

"Calklate I'm good-lookin' 'nough," declared the boy, pushing into the hall. "Ain't got no better clothes nor these, but he's goin' to dress me up spruce, so's you'll think I'm a young lord. Told me as there was a nice young lady as had to tend to his room and things, and it was too hard on her."

"That's a fact," said the girl, with a pleased smile. "It's me he means, and he's dreadful hard to please."

"Can't tire me out easy," declared Boots. "Let me see his room anyhow. Maybe I'll take the job and maybe I won't."

He pushed into the house, the girl following with an irresolute face. It seemed to dawn on her stupid soul that this was not just the thing, but the boy took the law into his own hands in such a way as to not give her time to think.

"Up this way?" he asked.

Thus he led rather than followed her to a room on the second floor. She opened the door.

"This is Mr. Benson's room," she said. "But—I don't know—you'd best wait down in the kitchen."

"Oh, I'll wait here," he said carelessly. "Won't be long. He's comin' back in half an hour. I'll jist fill the time in blackin' up his shoes. They want it mighty bad, now I tell you."

Without hesitation Boots grasped a pair of soiled shoes from near the wall, seated himself in the middle of the floor with his box be-

tween his knees, and began to make preparations for a job of blacking.

"Don't wonder he said it was a nice-lookin' young lady," remarked the shrewd boy, looking up into her flattered face. "Don't offen see 'em as good-lookin'. You needn't wait. I kin put in a good half hour over these shoes, an' fixin' things up."

At that moment the door bell rung again. The girl started.

"I've got to go to the door. You'd best come down."

"Don't mind me. I'll wait for him here."

She left the room with a doubtful look, as if she felt that this was not just the right thing.

Boots had gained his end. He was left alone in Philip Benson's room.

CHAPTER VII.

BOOTBLACK'S IMPUDENCE.

OF one thing Boots was very sure, which was that he had no time to spare. He was not afraid of the proprietor of the room returning. But the girl might be back at any moment. He must make the most of his opportunity.

Dropping the box and shoes, but leaving them so that he could return to them at a moment's notice, he sprang to his feet and looked eagerly around the room.

It was furnished as a gentleman's sleeping apartment, with neat though not expensive furniture. Part of this furniture evidently belonged to the house, but some, as the boy conjectured, was the private property of Mr. Benson.

Of the latter were some pictures of California scenes on the walls, and a small book-case with a desk front, and holding both books and papers.

But he had not yet seen what he wanted, the inlaid writing-desk. He looked around more closely, on the tables and in the wardrobe and closet, without success.

Below the revolving desk front were several drawers. He tried these in succession, but found them all locked except one.

The latter yielded and came open to his hand. He looked eagerly in, and to his delight caught sight of the desired object, a small writing-desk of a brownish red wood, and with a handsomely inlaid top.

But at this instant of discovery there came a sound from the hall without that caused him to close the drawer with the utmost haste.

It was the sound of approaching footsteps.

With a light spring the boy was back to his box and on his knees on the floor, brushing away for dear life at the soiled shoes.

The door opened and revealed the form of a stately lady, dressed in black silk, but with something of the landlady expression in her face.

She gazed at the scene before her in the greatest surprise.

"Who are you, boy? And what brings you here?" she asked tartly.

Boots lifted his head as if he had just now discovered her presence.

"'Scuse me, ma'am, I didn't know you was there," he said with a great show of politeness. "If you want ter see Mr. Benson he ain't in jist now, but he said he mought be back any minit."

"Who are you, I say? What are you doing here?"

"I'm a-blackin' Mr. Benson's shoes," answered the boy innocently. "I'm his boy. He's hired me to run errands, go ter the post-office, and do all sorts o' odd jobs."

"Strange he didn't tell me," she answered sourly.

"It's kinder queer, that's a fact," acknowledged Boots. "Thought everybody knowed all 'bout it. When he brung me here jist now he never said a word 'cept I was to brush up his things and shine his shoes."

"He brought you here?"

"Didn't s'pose I come here myself?" asked the unabashed boy. "I ain't got that much impudence. But he oughter 'ranged fur grub and sich things. I can't never get along without grub, nohow. 'Spect he's going to when he comes back, 'kaze he said he was in a big hurry."

"It's extraordinary! Truly extraordinary!" declared the offended landlady. "I never had anything of the kind to happen in my house before. Mr. Benson must explain this. What was that noise I heard here when I came to the door?" she asked suspiciously.

"That noise? You heered a noise?"

"Yes. What was it?"

"Guess it must ha' been me rappin' fur t'other shoe. Allers raps on the box when I gets one shoe done, fur t'other foot. Got inter sich a way of it that I has to do it."

"Oh, that was it?"

"Yes, mum. If you'll come in and take a cheer, mum, I'll tell you all 'bout the way us bootblacks does."

The lady smiled, rather sourly, at this suggestion.

"I do not wish to go into that line of business just at present," she remarked. "You may go on with your job, boy. But Mr. Benson must explain this. I do not intend to have my house taken possession of."

She shut the door and walked away. Boots dropped his brush and gave vent to a low whistle, while his face took on a comical grin.

"Things is gettin' kinder mixed," he remarked. "Got ter get through and git out 'afore old Benson comes, or somebody mought cotch me in a lie. And that wouldn't be healthy."

The footsteps of the retiring lady had no sooner sunk into silence in the distance than Boots was on his feet again and at the door.

He listened intently. There were some slight sounds down-stairs, but everything seemed silent on that floor. He thought that he heard a door open and close below, and then there came the sound of voices.

They seemed to be the voices of a man and woman, one low and deep-toned, the other sharp and loud.

"That's the old woman, I bet," he muttered. "Don't matter, anyhow, so she lets me 'lone fur ten minutes."

He glided swiftly to the book-case, shuffling his boots over the carpet, so as not to make a noise. Reaching it he opened the unlocked drawer, and took out the small writing-desk.

This was locked, but the key had not been removed. He hastily turned it, and threw back the lid.

The desk proved to be well filled with papers. These Boots removed without ceremony, seating himself on the floor with his prize, and flinging them on the carpet.

In a minute the desk was empty and the bottom revealed.

At first glance he thought that he must have been fooled. There was no indication of any false bottom. The opening appeared to be of the proper depth, and the bottom seemed solid and substantial.

"Wonder if he's got two on 'em, and I've got holt o' the wrong 'un? Here goes, anyhow. Ther' nothin' like tryin'."

He placed the box between his knees, so as to get a purchase on its two ends. This done, he squeezed with all his strength on the pliant wood.

A slight snap followed. The false bottom slid out of a groove in the side of the box, and bent upward, revealing a very narrow opening below. Within this space the eager eyes of the boy saw the edge of a thin, folded paper.

In his haste to seize it he released the pressure on the box, and the bottom slipped back into its place so quickly as to give his fingers a sharp pinch.

"Ouch!" he cried, thrusting the aching fingers into his mouth. "The critter bites. It's guv me a blood-blister on every finger."

Admonished by his disaster he went more carefully to work. Another pressure revealed the paper again. This time he drew it out very carefully.

It was a thin, yellowish document, folded into about four inches square. Boots looked at it as if he had discovered a magic talisman.

He was interrupted in his admiration by new sounds in the hall without. They were the voices which he had recently heard down-stairs. They had now ascended to the level of the second story and seemed approaching Mr. Benson's room.

There was not a second to lose. He hastily folded the paper until it was not more than an inch square, and deftly slipped it into the crack in his boot-sole, pushing it back until it was completely out of sight.

By this time the voices had reached the door.

"I tell you it is impossible, madame," came a loud, decided man's voice. "I never engaged any such character, and such impudence is impossible. You must have been dreaming."

"Very likely, indeed," answered the landlady scornfully. "Look for yourself, then, and see if it is a dream."

"Why, if I found any such insolent young scoundrel in my room I would break every bone in his body."

"Very well, you can have the opportunity," said the landlady, seizing the door handle. "But no, you may open it yourself, since you have doubted my word." She released the handle again.

This interval of conversation had been diligently improved by the shrewd boy.

He threw the papers back into the box with the utmost haste, shut down the lid, and turned the key.

He had closed the drawer of the bookcase. There was no time to open it again. He laid the writing-desk on a small table beside him, and sprang to the window, with a momentary impulse to make a leap for life.

A glance out showed him that this would be dangerous. He must face the music. He shuffled rapidly back to his box, and in an instant was actively engaged in his boot-shining avocation.

All this had been the work of a minute, while the landlady and her boarder were engaged in altercation at the door.

It opened at this instant, and the thin, sharp face of Philip Benson looked in, marked with a doubt that instantly turned to anger.

The landlady stood triumphantly behind him.

"Was I dreaming?" she asked, scornfully.

"Well, may I never!" cried the boarder, in astonished anger. "Who are you, you young villain? What are you doing?"

"Polishin' 'um now. Blacked 'um a bit ago."

"Who told you to do it? How dared you say that I hired you? Do you know what such a false statement is?"

"A lie, I s'pose," answered the boy, polishing away for dear life.

"How dared you come in here with a lie in your mouth?"

"Cause I hadn't nothin' else in it, I reckon. You dunno how hungry I was. Thought maybe if I brushed 'um up fine you mought guv me a reg'lar job, or fork over a dime anyhow."

Mr. Benson took a step back in his surprise. The landlady held up her hands in dismay.

"Well, if I ever! Talk about impudence!" she declared.

"He is here on a thieving trip, I believe," cried Benson. "Ha! what is my writing-desk doing on that table? He has been at work already."

He took a step toward the table, but instantly returned, with a cunning look.

"No, I will wait here," he remarked. "The door must be guarded till the young thief is searched. Mrs. Jones, will you send John up from below? This must be looked into."

While these words were being said Boots continued to rub away at the shoe in his hand, with as innocent an expression of face as if he had not a care in the world.

Yet there was a look in the corner of his eye which told that he was not so docile as he seemed.

The cunning youngster was watching his opportunity.

"How'll that do, Mr. Benson?" he asked, springing up, and offering the shoe to the surprised gentleman.

Benson was so taken by surprise that he involuntarily held out his hand for the shoe.

Boots dropped it into his hand, and then with a weasel-like whirl darted past him into the hall.

He did not get far, however. Mr. Benson sprang after him and hurled the shoe which he held with such sure aim that it took the boy in the neck and stretched him sprawling on the floor.

He made a hasty effort to squirm to his feet again, but before he could succeed his pursuer was upon him, and had seized him by the most available part of his person, which happened to be one of his boots.

A rapid struggle ensued, the boy rolling and squirming, and the man trying to get a surer hold upon him.

It ended in the boot coming off in Benson's hands, together with the rope which attached it to the boy's shoulder.

Springing to his feet Boots made a rush for the stairs, down which he plunged with one booted and one bare foot, with his pursuer close upon him.

But the boy had the start, and in a minute more had darted from the front door into the street, leaving one of his cherished boots as a trophy in the hands of his pursuer.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRECIOUS PAIR OF BOOTS.

MR. HUNTLY had rapidly regained strength during the period of Boots's detective service. When the boy called on him after his escape from Benson's pursuit it was to find the late invalid fully himself again.

He was walking the floor very uneasily when the boy entered. He was not quite satisfied in mind with having revealed his secret to this reck-

less youngster, who might spoil everything by imprudence.

He therefore sprang forward eagerly when the boy entered, his face lighting up with hopefulness.

"Back again," he exclaimed. "I am very glad to see you. What have you been doing all last week?"

"Workin'," answered Boots, briefly.

Mr. Huntly held the boy off and looked at him with eyes of surprise.

"Well, you're an odd-looking youngster. Where's your other boot? What are you stumping round in this fashion for?"

He laughed heartily as he gazed at the comical figure of his visitor, with one foot bare and the other booted.

"Guess a chap as ain't got but one boot, can't wear two," rejoined the boy, with an offended air. "Jist squat down and I'll tell you all 'bout it. Old Benson's got my t'other boot; but I'm bound to have it or split."

"Benson has it?" ejaculated Mr. Huntly, in great surprise.

"You bet. Jist wait. Goin' to tell you all 'bout it. You never heered o' sich a queer dodge."

Boots proceeded to describe his adventures to his highly interested auditor, stretching out his story at full length, in spite of Mr. Huntly's anxiety to hear the climax.

"Good!" he exclaimed, when the story reached its conclusion.

"Spendidly done! I had no idea you were so wide awake. But you have lost one of your boots, and it may be the one with the document hidden in it."

"Don't think it is," answered Boots with some confidence. "Ain't sure, 'kaze both my boots is shaky 'bout the soles and I jist took the fu'st one that come. But I've got a sneakin' idea as this 'un's the right 'un."

He slipped off the easy-fitting boot as he spoke, and proceeded to investigate its sole, Mr. Huntly bending over and looking on with great eagerness.

As the boy had said there was a decided crack in the sole, where the stitching had given away. It opened to the pressure of his thumb, and he peered eagerly in. He shook his head with a disappointed air.

"Tain't there," he muttered.

"Are you sure?" queried Mr. Huntly anxiously. "Look deeper. It may have slipped further in."

"Nary time," declared Boots. "Got the wrong one. Old Benson's got the right 'un. But I'm goin' to git it back, now you bet. He ain't got no right to keep my boot. Don't b'lieve it'd fit him. And he couldn't git 'long with one boot, nohow."

"Give me the boot," cried Mr. Huntly impatiently, snatching it from his hand. "This matter is too important for any half-way work. I must be sure the paper isn't there."

He had taken out his knife and was opening it as he spoke.

"What you goin' ter do?" demanded Boots in alarm. "That's my dad's boot. Don't you cut that up."

"I am only going to cut the stitches," answered Mr. Huntly. "I want to make a thorough search of the sole. I won't hurt it."

"Don't you do it! It'll jist be goin' flip-flap every step."

"Shut up, youngster," rejoined Mr. Huntly, as he proceeded to rip open the sole. "I will send it to a shoemaker and have it sewed up again."

"All right," answered Boots. "But I won't let nobody spile my dad's boots, as he said I was to wear till they was wore out."

A few minutes sufficed to cut the whole circuit of stitches. The lower sole dropped loose from the upper, leaving a gaping space between.

Mr. Huntly turned the boot over, but nothing dropped out. He looked into the cavity, but no trace of the paper was visible.

"You mought ha' b'lieved me," said Boots reproachfully. "I told you it weren't there. It's in t'other boot, an' you kin bet a pig and a pen that old Benson's got to fork over that there boot."

"At any rate, a shoemaker can soon repair this damage," rejoined Mr. Huntly, who was still examining the boot. "What's this? It looks more like parchment than leather."

He drew out a thin, flat mass, that had occupied part of the space between the soles. It was blackened with mud, yet had a papery appearance.

"Isn't this the lost document?" he asked.

"No. I ain't been in no mud."

"Then I suppose its a shoemaker's trick, to

make paper do the service of leather. But it is worth looking into."

He washed off the discolored surface in a basin of water, and then carefully opened the closely-folded mass. It gave a parchment-like rustle as it was opened. All the discoloration had been outside. Inwardly it appeared clean.

"It is parchment. And it has writing on it," remarked Mr. Huntly.

"Well, that's mighty queer," declared Boots. "But I s'pose its nothin' 'cept a sell."

"We shall soon see."

Mr. Huntly began to peruse the strangely-discovered document. As he did so, his expression changed, his eyes grew eager, his breath came more quickly.

He ended with a whistle that had in it something of the triumphant.

"What's it all 'bout?" cried Boots, eagerly.

"Let me see it. I kin read as well as the next feller."

"Wait a minute," answered Mr. Huntly. "I want you to answer me some questions. You say that your father left you these boots, saying that you were to wear them?"

"Yes. Jist 'fore he pegged out."

"Didn't he consider that they would not fit you?"

"Maybe he meant I was to wear 'em arter I'd grow'd up. But I got out o' shoe leather, and thought I'd sooner wear my dad's boots than go barefooted."

"Was that all he said? Did he hint at any secret connected with the boots?"

"Nary time. Reckon he mought ha' wanted to, fur he tried hard ter say say somethin' more. But he kicked the bucket too soon."

"He died and left his story half told," rejoined Mr. Huntly. "There was a secret, and a very important one, and that was why he wanted you to keep the boots. Leave this paper in my hands, my boy. You would not understand this, but I do. Don't you think you can trust me?"

"Reckon I kin. You freeze on to it, Mr. Huntly. I only want to ax one question. Is it 'bout me?"

"It will be the making of you, if I am not mistaken. And it may be the ruin of Philip Benson."

"That's all O. K. I don't like him fur nothin'."

"But we want that other boot."

"Goin' to have it, too. He ain't got no biz keepin' my boot."

"You must manage somehow to recover it. But you can't go barefoot, or go stumping about in this fashion. Come with me, and I will have you fitted with a pair of shoes."

In half an hour afterward the boy was transformed. Mr. Huntly, after providing him with shoes, decided that ragged clothes and new shoes did not harmonize, and did not stop till he had the boy rigged out from top to toe in new garments.

The new suit had a wonderful effect on his appearance. He came out a handsome, sprightly lad.

"None o' ther boys won't know me," said Boots, rather doubtfully. "S'pose some on 'em'll holler dude arter me. But the chap as does it'll git his mouth bu'sted. Good-by, Mr. Huntly. I'm goin' arter that there boot."

"Good luck go with you, my boy."

Boots walked away rather proudly. He felt like a butterfly that has come out of his ragged caterpillar skin. Mr. Huntly followed him with his eyes.

"All is going well," he muttered. "This has been a week of surprise and discovery."

An hour afterward Boots found himself in front of the house on Spruce street, the scene of his late adventure.

Without a moment's hesitation he stepped up to the door and rung the bell. Mentally he was utterly without a plan of procedure, and left all to chance and his quick wits.

The same girl as before opened the door. She looked at him, but evidently did not recognize him.

"Come 'round arter my boot," he said, in a matter-of-fact manner.

"What?"

"My boot; as I left the last time I was here."

"Well, I declare, if it isn't that rascally little thief and robber as tried to steal from Mr. Benson! The impudence of you to come here! Go way at once before I send for a policeman!"

"Now that's a nice way ter talk to a good-lookin' chap like me, with nice clothes on, that only axes fur his boot. And arter I told old Benson what a nice-lookin' gal you was, and he said you was ugly as mud. And there wasn't no stealin' 'cept he stole my boot. And I want my boot as he stole."

The girl looked at him with less spitefulness. The compliment had toned her down somewhat. "I don't know anything about your boot," she declared.

"Won't you hunt it up fur me?" asked the boy, persuasively. "It spiles the pair to lose one. I'll giv you half a dollar if you'll git it. 'Tain't no sorter use to old Benson."

The girl opened her eyes at his offer.

"Where can I find you if I get the boot?" she asked.

"Jist down here, round the next corner."

"I can't go out. But give me the money and I'll tell you where to look—"

She was interrupted in what she intended to say by the sharp voice of the landlady, from the rear of the hall.

"Who are you talking to, Kate? Who is that boy?"

"He is asking to see Mr. Thomson?" said the girl, demurely.

"Well, there isn't any Mr. Thomson here. Ha! where are your eyes, girl? It is the little villain that tried to rob Mr. Benson! Catch him, and drag him in, and then run for a policeman! Don't let the rascal escape!"

She hastened forward as she called this out in a shrill voice. But Boots was not to be trapped so easily as that.

He sprung from the step, and put his thumb insolently to his nose.

"Better catch yer temper, ma'am. It's runnin' from you, and you'll lose it if you ain't wide awake. Good-by, I'm a-goin'. I'll drop round ag'in when you're in a better humor."

He walked away whistling and paying no attention to the loud-voiced vituperation of the landlady, which continued till he had disappeared around a neighboring corner.

He did not go far around the corner, but stood there peeping out until he saw Mrs. Jones re-enter the house. Then he returned to the street he had just left.

"No use talkin', but that half dollar's bound to fetch it. I could see it in that gal's eyes. Wonder what she was goin' to say when the old woman bu'sted in? Anyhow I'll wait round here. I bet I'll see her peepin' out 'fore long."

He lounged about the vicinity, with his eyes mainly fixed on the locality of the house.

In front of it stood an ash-barrel, waiting for the coming of the ash-cart. An Italian with a bag on his shoulder had just stopped at the barrel, and was probing among its contents. An idea came to the boy's mind.

"Maybe they've flung it 'mong the ashes. Shouldn't wonder if that was what the gal was goin' to say."

He was making his way toward the barrel as these thoughts passed through his mind.

He had just reached it when the rag-picker's stick drew up something heavy. In a minute more the boy, to his surprise and delight, saw his lost boot dangling in the air.

It was white with ashes, but was unmistakably the desired article.

He sprung forward with the leap of a cat, and seized the dangling prize, so precious in his eyes.

"That's my boot!" he cried.

"It's mine-a!" screamed the Italian, snatching at the rope that was fastened to the boot-straps.

"I found-a it! Let-a go."

"Not much," rejoined Boots. "It's mine, I say. If you don't drap that rope I'll plug yer eyes chock full o' ashes."

"It's min-a, and I won't let-a go! It's my boot-a."

"You lie, you plug ugly."

The screaming voice of the Italian had now brought another of his countrymen to his side. The odds began to gather against the anxious boy.

It struck him that diplomacy was the best course for him to pursue.

"Look here, you dago, what do you want fer that boot? 'Tain't wu'th much without its mate. But I'd sooner giv yer five cents fur it than fight 'bout it."

"I want-a ten cents. I wont-a take less than ten cents."

"All right! Here's yer dime. Let go, now, 'kaze the boot's mine."

The ragpicker did so, and the triumphant boy fairly danced with delight as he brushed the ashes from his recovered treasure.

"Made a clean forty cents on it," he declared. "An' that gal's out o' pocket a half. And, oh! lawsee, ain't I worked it neat on old Benson!"

He hurried away from the spot, in fear of some reverse of fortune.

In a half-hour afterward he broke into the room occupied by Mr. Huntly, whirling the boot in triumphant circles around his head.

"Here it is! I nailed it!" he shouted, as he danced over the floor. "And here's yer paper, jist where I put it. You bet we got old Benson where the hair's short this time!"

He drew out the concealed paper and handed it to Mr. Huntly, whose eyes blazed with eager joy.

CHAPTER IX.

A DESPERATE STREET BATTLE.

WE must go forward a month in time. During that period nothing of importance had happened to our characters. Between the two mortal foes, Benson and Huntly, all seemed at rest. Nothing further was seen of Benson. If he was still keeping up his system of spying on Huntly he had employed some other agent than himself.

As for Boots no inducement could make him wear his new clothes on week-days. He laid them aside as a Sunday suit, and returned to his rags and his boots, for which his affection was redoubled.

"I know the next thing some feller'll be callin' me a dude," he declared. "Then that feller'll git his snout caved in. Anyhow I don't want ter go round like a frescoed pig. I'd sooner stick to my old bristles."

During this interval Boots did not forget his old friends of the "Indy" engine. He was as ardent a fireman as ever. And in this Mr. Huntly had joined him. He seemed to have no special business, and spent many of his spare hours in the engine-house.

Meanwhile a state of fierce excitement had grown up among the Industry boys. A year before they had had a hard fight with the West End engine, a company stationed in the vicinity of the Schuylkill.

In this quarrel the Wests had been badly worsted and their engine so seriously broken up as to render it useless.

They had sworn revenge, and as the anniversary of the fight came near the Indies were on the alert, expecting an attack from their old foes.

This preliminary is necessary to explain what followed.

At ten o'clock on the night of the 20th of June the wild alarm of the fire-bells called the members of the Industry to their duty.

Fifty stalwart fellows were in the house, dozing, chatting, or card-playing. They had gathered in force, in expectation of mischief.

In an instant they were on their feet, arraying themselves in their fire capes and hats, and listening intently to the message of the bells.

"Northwest. Somewhere about Fairmount," cried one. "Right among the West-Enders."

"Then you bet there's fun a-brewing. We'd best get ready."

By the time the rope was manned new-comers came dashing in from the outside.

"It's the old lamp-black factory near the wire bridge," cried one of these.

"Set afire by the Wests, to fetch us out there," exclaimed Joe Bunting. "'Tain't the first time. Look lively, lads. We're in for a row."

In two minutes afterward the engine whirled out into the street with sixty strong men at the rope. Among these was Mr. Huntly, who had been seated chatting in the engine-house when the alarm sounded.

Boots, as usual, was not far away. As the engine rounded with a swing into the street he made his appearance from some dark covert, grasped it from behind, and was jerked so suddenly from his feet that he was hurled headforemost into the box of the engine.

By the time he had regained his equilibrium they were a hundred yards down the street. The shrewd youngster concluded to stay where he was. There were enough hands at the rope to pull him and the engine both.

The hardy fellows who tugged at the rope did so with set lips and determined looks. They were sure that this was a ruse to bring them into the territory of their enemy, and they scented danger in the air.

It would not be the first time that a building had been set on fire for a similar purpose.

Some of the older and wiser heads of the company had attempted to dissuade them from making the run, saying that there would be enough engines out to handle the fire.

But this advice was lost on the ardent spirits of the younger firemen. That the Industry should be recreant to her duty was not to be thought of, and if their foes wished to attack them, they might have the opportunity.

The time had never been known when a Phila-

delphia fireman held back for fear of a fight, and it was not in the blood of the Indy boys to set such a cowardly example.

Away they rattled over the rough cobblestones. The streets were not then gridironed in every direction with car-tracks, and it needed plenty of hard muscle to drag one of these heavy hand-engines to a fire.

A half-hour's sharp run brought them to the vicinity of the conflagration. It was in a dangerous district, just the locality for an ambush. The low-lying region was covered with houses of dilapidated appearance, and cut into a multitude of small streets, courts, and alleys, inhabited by a lawless population. At that period there was no more dangerous locality in the whole city.

As the engine rattled along through this district, groups of men could be seen at the entrance to every court and alley. And had the firemen been behind the scenes, they would have discovered that signals were being transmitted in advance of their arrival.

They were evidently waited for, and their approach was heralded to their enemies ahead.

Several other engines had reached the fire in advance, and streams of water were already being thrown upon it as the Industry dashed up to the vicinity of the conflagration.

The point they had reached was dark and dismal. The gas-lamps were out, and probably had been purposely extinguished.

As they came whirling up, it was to find the street occupied by a dense crowd, while from every lane-like opening glared dark and scowling faces.

It appeared the lull before the storm. Every one seemed waiting for some warlike signal.

Several men had sprung upon the engine and were prepared to attach the hose the instant they reached the desired locality. Joe Bunting stood on the galley, grasping the goose-neck of the engine, while he shouted out some directions to those below.

At this moment a sharp shrill whistle sounded from somewhere in the vicinity. It was instantly succeeded by a shower of stones and bricks, flung as it seemed by hundreds of hands, and hurtling among the men at the rope, many of whom were felled to the earth.

Joe Bunting, the most exposed figure of all the Indy crew, was a fair target for the missiles of the foe. A brick, flung by a sure and strong hand, came whirling through the air and struck him in the back of the head with such a resounding crack that it seemed as if his skull must have burst open.

He fell as if he had been shot, headforemost to the ground.

As it happened there stood below him, near the side of the engine, an empty flour barrel, with its headed end upright.

Plumb on this head struck Joe's hard poll. It gave way beneath the blow, and into the barrel he plunged, the loosened staves tumbling in a shower upon him.

One would have thought that after such an experience Joe was well "out of the fight," even if he was not killed outright.

But to think so would be to take slender account of the hardness of Joe Bunting's skull or the valor of his spirit.

In an instant the shower of staves which covered him rose as if lifted by an earthquake, and the fallen man sprung to his feet with eyes that blazed with warlike fury.

He grasped one of the staves as he rose and whirled it around him with an energy that soon gave him a clear space. No less than four men fell, hurled to the earth by this novel but effective weapon, and in much less time than it takes to tell it Joe was master of the field, his enemies crowding back in terror from his warlike fury.

While this incident was taking place a desperate battle was going on all around the engine. The showers of stones had driven the men from the rope, but they crowded around the engine, while the sharp crack of pistol-shots filled the air. The Indies, destitute of other missiles, freely used this more dangerous weapon.

For five minutes one of the most desperate firemen's fights that had ever taken place in the streets of Philadelphia raged around the battered engine. Dozens of men were stretched upon the ground, some to rise again, others with all the fight taken out of them.

The volleys of stones had somewhat diminished, but the pistol-shots rose into a regular fusillade, and bullets flew with perilous freedom through the thronging mass.

Mr. Huntly, who found himself in the midst of the combat, fought for his side with as much vigor as any of the combatants. He had a loaded cane as weapon, and with this he warded

off all assaults and quickly felled half a dozen of his opponents.

Yet there was one foe whom he failed to observe. The dark, cat-like face of Philip Benson glared out from the midst of the enemy. From his expression one would have thought that the whole affray had been stirred up by himself to give him an opportunity to get at his mortal foe.

His movement was the sly, gliding one of a tiger-cat as he wormed his way through the fighting hosts to the back of his enemy.

Unconscious of his peril Huntly continued to face outward, dodging the hurtling stones, and easily fighting off every one that attacked him.

At this moment a sharp cry of alarm, in the shrill tones of his young friend Boots, met his ear.

"Look out, Mr. Huntly! Stoop down, or you're a goner!"

He involuntarily sought to obey, but he was too late. A stunning blow, hard enough as it seemed to crash in his skull, fell on his head from behind, hurling him prostrate and senseless to the stones of the street.

Benson had struck him with an iron bar, wielded with all his strength.

With the brutal instinct of the murderer he lifted his weapon again, hoping to safely dash out the brains of his foe under cover of the fight of the firemen.

But he failed in his deadly purpose. For at that instant Boots sprang into the space beside him and with a quick leap grasped the uplifted weapon, dragging it from his hand.

"Looky here, Phil Benson, you can't murder Mr. Huntly while I'm around. And if you don't make tracks your goose's cooked."

The indignant boy whirled the bar round his head as he spoke. Benson cast one glance at him, recognized the boy of the boots and hastily darted back from the avenging blow.

"You'd best slide," yelled the indignant boy after him. "You can't git nothin' 'to boot' this time, from this coon. And if you've hurt Mr. Huntly I'm a-goin' fur your bacon."

As Boots spoke he found himself forced back by the retreating ranks of his friends. The enemy had proved too strong and were driving them back step by step, more than half their number being already prostrate, and most of the others wounded.

And now a crowd of yelling and triumphant foes sprang out and grasped the rope of the engine. In a minute more it was jerked beyond the reach of its friends, and was being dragged rapidly through the dark street, amid yells, whistles, and every triumphant and derisive sound.

CHAPTER X.

A SAVAGE SCENE.

THE firemen of the Industry, led by Joe Bunting, made a desperate charge to recover their engine, on seeing it hauled away in triumph by their foes.

But the odds were too great against them. A throng of friends of the West Ends filled the street from side to side, closing up behind the captured engine, and choking the avenue so as to render passage impossible.

With feet and fists, with clubs and spanners, with stones and bullets, the Indies fought their foes, forcing their way step by step into the heart of the throng, knocking down dozens of men in their fierce assault.

Yet the effort was hopeless. They were outnumbered five to one, and the crowd was so dense that it was impossible to retreat, even if defeated.

Nor was success entirely on the side of the Indies. One by one they went down under the blows of their enemies until their numbers were so reduced that the brave fellows were forced to give way before their foes.

They slowly withdrew, utterly worn out with their efforts, and sick at heart with the loss of the engine which they loved as the apple of their eye.

While this affray was in progress the captured machine was being hauled in triumph through the streets, a hundred men and boys manning the rope, and as many others running wildly alongside, almost splitting their throats with yelling.

Along Callowhill street they rushed to the wire suspension bridge, which at this date crossed the Schuylkill near the Fairmount Water Works.

Over the bridge the heavy engine was hurled, as easily as if it was of a feather's weight, and to the unsettled region beyond, where a steep hill tried the strength of the captors.

Reaching the level beyond the hill, they

turned to the right, hauling their prize over the rough ground west of the river until they had gained the rocky summit of a steep ledge that here bordered the stream, fifty feet in perpendicular height.

Here the yelling crew came to a halt, after whirling the captured machine to a point within three feet of the brink of the cliff.

Their plans had evidently been laid in advance. Some of them at once produced axes. Others went in search of inflammable materials. The utter destruction of the captured engine was contemplated.

One huge fellow, with a whirl of the ax round his head, brought it down in crushing fury on the handsomely-ornamented side of the doomed machine.

The stroke had an unexpected effect. Out of the box-like cavity at the rear of the engine there suddenly rose a shaggy head, followed by a diminutive body.

It was the face and figure of Boots, clearly revealed in the blaze of the torches which had now been kindled.

"Like ter know what's up," he demanded, with great indignation. "'Tain't no square dodge, nohow, ter hit somethin' as can't hit back. Git out, you pirates, or I'll fotch the chap as hits that injine ag'in!"

A torrent of angry sounds rose in response to this defiance.

"Who is it?" "Fetch him, lads!" "Knock his brains out!" "Toss him over the rocks!" "Go for the fool!"

"Come ahead!" yelled Boots, valiantly. "I'm an Indy boy, every time. I'm a boss as never cries to go home. Trot out yer fighters if you want to see fun."

At this instant a stone whirled past the head of the defiant youngster, causing him to suddenly dodge.

A shove in the rear from the end of a club completed his discomfiture, and sent him sprawling to the ground.

A dozen angry assailants instantly rushed upon him, but they were stopped by the man with the ax, who held the handle of his weapon crosswise before him.

"Git back!" he cried hoarsely. "Don't you see it's only a wiffet of a boy? Let the little cur snarl if he wants to. We ain't come out here to fight with gutter-snipes."

This contemptuous address settled Boots. His intended assailants turned from him with an air of disdain, and bent their attention on the destruction of their captured prize.

The boy fairly danced with rage at being treated with such contempt, and dared the whole crowd on to fight, with the courage of one of Homer's heroes.

But as no one paid any more attention to him than if he had been a yelping terrier he subsided into silence, and stood looking with angry eyes at the ruin of his favorite machine.

A half-dozen axes were now at work, rending and tearing the devoted engine into firewood. Its handsomely painted sides and galley, its brasswork polished until it shone like gold, all that had made it the pride of the company that owned it, rapidly vanished under the blows of these remorseless axes.

Yet it was possible that the Indies might get aid and come to the rescue. More radical work was needed.

"Back there! Give us a chance!" cried a party who ran up with their arms full of kindling-wood.

The axmen stepped back as these fellows pushed their inflammable stores under and heaped them upon the engine.

Then the torches which had been previously kindled were thrust into the mass, which quickly burst into flames at a dozen points.

The wood was dry and splintery, and the blaze shot through and through the mass, climbing upward in curling flames. In a minute this destructive element was licking the wooden sides of the engine, and kindling the splinters which the axes had made.

Within five minutes of the time of applying the torches the whole pile was a blazing mass, the flames shooting twenty feet high in the air, curling, hissing, and roaring as if in the triumph of victory.

The river gleamed with the lurid reflection, and far and wide around the whole locality was lit up with the destructive glare.

Never did Indian warriors dance with more savage joy around the fire that consumed some captured foe than did the West-Enders around their burning prize.

Dancing, singing and yelling, in the red light of the whirling flames, that flickered on trees and rocks and human forms, no wilder or more

savage scene could well be imagined, and the spectacle seemed more like the war-dance of a host of savage warriors than any action of civilized men.

It was more than Boots could stand. Finding that no one paid the slightest heed to him he darted away in a bursting rage, promising dire revenge in the name of the Indies.

But the victors were too good-humored over their triumph to heed his boyish clamor.

"Best hold on, Boots, and see it out," cried one, "so's you can tell them all about it."

"If you find any of the Indy roosters fetch them along," advised a second. "We've given their engine a roast, and we'll give them a fry."

"Shet up yer 'tater-traps!" cried Boots, furiously. "Jist you see if the Indy boys don't git even fur this—and 'fore long, too. You bet, when you wake up them coons you can't rock 'em to sleep ag'in easy."

A roar of derisive laughter followed, as the boy dashed away, wild with the anger that possessed him.

He had not reached the bridge in his retreat when he met a group of the defeated firemen, led by Joe Bunting. They had somehow got round their foes.

"You come too late," cried Boots, sadly.

"It's all up with the old Indy. And ther's enough o' the dirty pirates there to eat you up."

"Hillo, Boots!" cried Joe, in surprise. "You here? I thought you were kissing the cobblestones back yonder. What do you know, youngster? Tell us all about it."

While Boots was relating to his friends the scene he had just witnessed the work of destruction continued. The flames soon began to sink for want of fuel, while the ruined engine appeared in their midst a blackened and useless mass.

Its woodwork had been turned to ashes, and the yet more valuable iron and brasswork was dropping asunder, all the finely-fitting valves and joints ruined by the action of the heat.

But the revengeful intentions of the West-Enders had not yet been consummated. Obtaining some strong poles from the vicinity they set them against the side of the destroyed engine, and thrust with such force as to send it toppling over the edge of the cliff.

A fiercer shout of triumph than ever arose as they heard it crunching on the rocks in its fall, and reaching the bottom with a dead crash that was the sweetest of music to their ears.

"That settles the hash of the Indy engine," cried the fellow who had saved Boots from the fury of the mob. "She'll never squirt a stream on a fire again, and we've paid our debts in a way they won't soon forget. Now let's slide, fellows. Our night's work is done."

This wise advice was obeyed by the greater part of the mob, only the wilder and more revengeful portion of the crowd remaining.

These, not content with the damage they had done, made their way to the bottom of the cliff, intent on insulting the remains of the senseless object to which they had wrought such ruin.

There were some forty or fifty in this gang but their sport was not of long duration.

For suddenly, from the top of the cliff, there came raining down upon them such a volley of stones, sticks, and blazing fragments of the late conflagration, that fully a dozen of them were hurled senseless to the ground ere they could escape from the dangerous locality.

Rushing back with wild yells they attempted to make their way to the top of the cliff again, but they were met with still fiercer yells, and a storm of missiles against which it was impossible to make way.

The Indy boys, led by Boots, had reached the scene, and were revenging themselves upon their triumphant foes.

The fight continued sharp and fierce. The Indies were doubly outnumbered by the West-Enders, but they had the post of vantage, and they held their own against every effort of their foes to charge up the hill.

The locality was thickly strewn with small stones, which furnished them with an abundance of weapons.

Every moment some of the West-Enders were hurled prostrate by the volleys that rattled in profusion down the hill, and before five minutes they were forced to turn and take to flight, pursued by their fierce foes, who kept up the battle with undiminished energy.

Not until every man of the defeated party, except those who lay insensible where they had fallen, had been driven from the scene, did the Indies return to the locality of the lawless outbreak.

Then they gathered sadly around the ruins of their beloved engine, as solemn as a group of mourners at a funeral. They were more depressed and downcast, indeed, than if the chief member of their company were being consigned to the grave.

The iron and brass-work of the engine lay before them, utterly ruined, and heaped together in an indistinguishable mass. An occasional gleam from some fragment of the yet burning woodwork served to light up the distressing scene.

"Here's the name-plate, anyhow," cried Joe Bunting. "We'll take that home and keep it for a new engine. For you bet high we're not the boys to let the old lass go under without getting a new one to take her place."

The brass name-plate, with the word "Industry" in displayed letters, was recovered, and the party sadly turned their steps homeward, as if they had bid good-by to the corpse of their best friend.

On reaching the engine-house they found that many of those who had been wounded in the fight had returned, some of them seriously hurt, but most of them bleeding from superficial wounds.

Several had been carried back, too badly injured to help themselves. Among these was Mr. Huntly, who yet lay in a senseless state from the severe blow which had been dealt him by his mortal enemy.

CHAPTER XI.

A GREAT NIGHT FOR THE INDIES.

It was a rainy night in late August. The Industry engine-house was empty, with the exception of half a dozen sickly-looking individuals, who had not yet recovered from their injuries in the great West End fight.

Mr. Huntly was among them, weak and emaciated. He had been seriously injured, and though he was now able to go about, he was yet suffering from the effects of the stunning blow he had received.

All the able-bodied men of the company were out. An alarm had sounded two hours before, and though they had no engine they could not resist the instinct to proceed to the fire.

They had sworn revenge upon their foes, and the hope that some opportunity might be presented was one of the motives that took them to the scene.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when they returned, dripping with rain, weary with their labors, yet full of joy and excitement.

They came bursting into the house, all talking at once, and as enthusiastic as an army just returned from victory.

"What is the matter?" demanded one of the invalids. "Stop your clatter, and let's hear what's up. Haven't been swallowing whisky by the bucketful, have you?"

"Nary a drop!" cried Joe Bunting. "But we've got even with the bloody Wests, and that's better than mint-juleps and cocktails."

The men in the house sprung to their feet excitedly at these words, their faces lighting up with joy.

"What is it? Let it out! There don't seem none o' you hurt."

"There weren't no fight to speak of," answered Joe. "They didn't stand on the'r mettle fer a cent. We made a rush, and swept them off the rope like so many onions."

"And you smashed and burnt their engine?"

"Reckon not!" exclaimed Boots, springing forward with a great show of indignation. "You never see'd sich soft-hearted fellers. They was afeard they mought hurt somebody or somethin'."

"Dry up!" exclaimed Joe, angrily. "Put a stopper on that chap's nozzle, somebody. We did all we could, fellers. There were five hundred after us, and we had to make time. We run the West End machine down to the Arch street wharf, and give it a send over into the Delaware. It's floating down-stream among the fishes now."

A chorus of cries, hurrahs, and wild shouts of joy followed this announcement, the excited firemen dancing over the floor with the wildness of lunatics.

"She oughter been chopped up and burnt," persisted Boots, who was not going to let himself be sat down upon. "That's what they done to the Indy. Them coons'll jist fish the'r machine outer the river, and she'll be as good as ever. Them ain't my notions 'bout gittin' even."

"Dry up, I tell you, you squealing shoat!" roared Joe. "See here, fellers. We mought have given her some chops with the ax, but I hadn't the heart to do it. I'm a fireman to the

bones, I am. I'd as lieve hit a baby with an ax as an injine. I ain't no fire runt like them Schuykill cusses."

"Good for you, Joe!" exclaimed a dozen voices. "Them's our sentiments. That's the talk of a true fireman."

"Tain't my idear," persisted Boots. "Tit for tat's my idear."

"You bloody little nannygoat, if you don't cork your windpipe, I'll use you to plug up a broken pane of glass in the winder," declared Joe, in a rage.

"Got ter catch yer weasel 'fore you kin squeeze him," cried Boots defiantly. "What do yer say, Indies? Ain't ther' nobody on my side?"

A chorus of "Yes" and "No" rose from the assembly. It was plain that Boots was not alone in his ideas, but that many of the firemen were of the same opinion.

"Ther' weren't none o' you over at the old quarry, where they chopped up our injine inter mince-meat, and then sot her afire," declared Boots. "I see'd all that, and I ain't goin' to let up with no dive in the river."

The irrepressible boy had almost stirred up a quarrel in the room. Excited conversation was going on, and the firemen seemed divided into two parties, who were getting heated in argument.

"Stop all this debate," exclaimed another voice. "Not a word more, Boots, you have said enough. Listen to me, gentlemen. I have something for your ears."

It was Mr. Huntly who had spoken. The conversation instantly ceased, and the firemen turned to him with respectful and attentive looks. They could not help feeling that Mr. Huntly was their superior, and that they were honored by his presence.

"I have several things which I want to say to you," he began. "In the first place I am satisfied that the affair in which your engine was wrecked was the result of a plot aimed at me."

"At you?" they cried in chorus.

"Yes. I have learned that Philip Benson, my enemy, is in alliance with your foes. It was through his arts that the lampblack factory was set on fire that night. He knew that I had made some runs with the Industry, and wanted to bring me out to that locality."

"What for?"

"To kill me, if he could. And he came near it. Boots here saved my life."

"But that didn't make them burn the Indy," declared Joe Bunting. "They had that down for us."

"It gave them the opportunity. Now I've got one thing to tell you, lads. It was my fault that you lost your engine, and it's my duty to provide you with another."

"No! no! It ain't square! We won't let you!" came the excited cries of his hearers.

"One word more, boys. Don't fancy I can't afford it. I know what I am doing. I ordered you a new engine a month ago. It is finished now, and only waits for the old name plate of the Industry. And then you will have the handsomest engine in Philadelphia."

If a keg of powder had exploded under the floor of the engine-house it could not have produced a greater effect upon all present. The whole assembly like one man sprung to their feet, and a wild chorus of hurrahs went up that seemed as if they would lift the roof from the building.

"Three cheers for John Huntly, the best fellow in the United States! Hip! hip! hurrah!" yelled Joe, in stentorian tones.

The cheers that followed were loud enough to have come from a regiment.

"Three more for the new Indy engine!" cried Jake Brown, another of the firemen.

These were given with equal vim and volume.

"Three for success to our friends and confusion to our foes, and down with all murdering interlopers like Phil Benson!"

Once more the room resounded with the wild cheers of the excited firemen.

"And a tiger for Boots!" yelled that irrepressible youngster, springing to the seat of a high chair, and crowing like a cock.

The tiger that followed could hardly be delivered for the shouts of laughter that accompanied it. Such enthusiastic joy and wild good-humor had never before reigned within those walls.

"What shall it be, lads? A dance? A torch-light parade? Say something before I bust," screamed an excited fellow. "I can't nohow keep still. I vote we lift our benefactor on a platform, and carry him on our heads round the square."

"Second that motion," cried a dozen others.

"No, no," exclaimed Mr. Huntly. "I want

a voice in that vote. It is my desire to keep quiet in this business, my good friends. And besides I am in no condition for such a mad demonstration. You forget that I am an invalid."

"That's so, lads," declared Joe Bunting. "Wait till we bring the new engine home. Then we can have our fling. You bet we'll make Rome howl then."

"I want you all to sit down and keep quiet," continued Mr. Huntly. "I have something more to tell you in which you will all be interested. It is something about this little chap here." He laid his hand on the head of the boy beside him.

"Bout me?" cried Boots, in astonishment. "You don't know nothin' 'bout me?"

"Ain't I told you to dry up?" declared Joe. "Go on, Mr. Huntly. We are all listening."

"I need not tell you that Philip Benson hates me," began Mr. Huntly, as the firemen seated themselves and listened attentively.

"The reason he hates me is because he fears me. He has in his life done many rascally tricks. One of those tricks was a criminal one. He committed a forgery to get possession of a valuable property. And he put out of sight the heir of that property, then a mere child."

"That forged paper fell into my hands. I lost it again, but the villain did not know that. He tried to murder me, but failed through the courage of this brave boy."

"Dunno as I done much," muttered Boots. "Had ter git out o' that there fiery furnace myself, and didn't mind your comin' 'long."

"Won't somebody choke that boy? or give him a bannanar to keep his jaws busy?" queried Joe, with a humorous grin.

"As I have said, I had lost the paper he wanted. Since then I have recovered it. It was in Benson's own possession, though he did not know it. I obtained it through the aid of this boy, who proved himself as sharp-witted as he had already proved himself brave."

"Now that's all gammon," muttered Boots. "It didn't take no great smartness to discount old Benson. That ain't nothin' ter brag on. You oughter see what I kin do when I wake up."

"Just fling that boy here, Jake, till I swallow him," roared Joe. "Nothing else will shut him up."

"I reckon if you do you'll have a wuss time inside yer corporation than the whale as swallowed Jonah!" retorted Boots.

"I recovered the lost paper," continued Mr. Huntly. "But that was not all. I obtained another paper equally valuable. I am not only in condition to make the villain yield up his ill-gotten wealth, but I have discovered the heir to that wealth, the child whom he kidnapped and sent out of the way."

The breathless silence of the auditors showed their deep interest in this narrative.

"It was in the Far West that these events took place," continued the speaker. "The child, then about five years old, was stolen by a villain in Benson's pay. He disappeared, and for many years vanished from sight. Yet the ruffianly kidnapper had some conscience. He prepared a paper containing a confession of his villainy. He hid this in a secret place, and died before he could reveal the secret to the boy, who had always looked upon him as his father."

"By the strangest accident I discovered that paper. I have it in my possession now. Where do you think I found it? And who do you think is the lost heir?"

All disclaimed any idea on the subject. Boots for the first time kept perfectly still. Yet he had never been more excited. He began to see at what Mr. Huntly was aiming.

"Jerry Johnson was the name of the kidnapper," announced Mr. Huntly. "He hid the confession in the sole of one of his boots, and left these boots as a legacy to his reputed son. It was there I found it. This is the boot in which the valuable paper was hidden, and this boy is heir to the estate stolen by Philip Benson."

He pointed to the boy beside him, and to one of his boots as he spoke.

The repressed excitement of the listeners could no longer be contained. A roar of surprise came from their lips. Like one man they rose, caught up the willing boy and tossed him above their heads, singing a wild air of triumph as they marched with him round and round the room.

"This is just the biggest night the Indies ever saw," cried Joe Bunting.

"And I'm jist the biggest youngster as ever tried to wear out his daddy's boots," yelled the delighted boy. "Tell yer what it is, fellers, if I'm a capitalist, I'm a-goin' to pay my sheer on that

new injine. I'll buy it all if Mr. Huntly'll only let me. Reckon I oughter do that much for the old Indy."

"And them's our boots!" cried Joe Bunting, springing to the boy and dragging them from his feet. "We're going to keep them in a glass case in the engine-house, and we'll have Boots's picture painted on the new engine, boots and all. Won't we, boys?"

A shout of assent to this proposition followed. Boots was for once in his life a hero, and he enjoyed it with all the zest of young blood, as the excited firemen kept up their frolic until long past midnight of that eventful occasion.

CHAPTER XII.

BRINGING HOME THE NEW ENGINE.

THERE had never been a livelier and merrier day in the Quaker City than that in which the Industry fire company brought home their new engine.

It was made the occasion of a firemen's parade on a small scale, all the friendly companies turning out to accompany the new machine to its housing.

Long lines of stalwart men marched in procession through the streets, in the bravery of their holiday costumes, some as pioneers with shining axes on their shoulders, others manning the double lines of rope by which the engines and hose-carriages were drawn through the streets.

These useful machines were in all the bravery of their holiday attire, shining as if their brass was gold and their iron silver, while they were half lost under the wealth of flowers which had been profusely showered upon them.

The day was bright and clear, and every street through which the procession passed was crowded with spectators, men, women, and children, all as happy and enthusiastic as if they themselves owned those glittering and flower-laden machines.

But the principal enthusiasm was reserved for the new Industry engine, which closed the parade, and which was voted by all observers the handsomest fire-engine the city had ever possessed.

In this case the flowers were reserved for the jovial firemen, some of whom seemed to bend beneath their weight of wreaths and bouquets, while the engine was left unadorned that every one might see its beauty.

It was all polish, glitter and gleam, a freshness that would disappear in its first service at a fire, but which now called forth the acclamations of the crowd.

On its sides were painted vignettes, of which one was a portrait of Mr. Huntly, the other the picture of a saucy-looking youth, ragged in his attire, and wearing a pair of boots six sizes too large for him.

Whom the picture represented most of the spectators knew. And those who did not know had no difficulty in discovering. For seated on the galley of the engine appeared the form of the original of the picture, dressed in his best and adorned with flowers, but wearing his boots, with as much pride as if they had been the foot-gear of a king.

Mr. Huntly had positively declined to take any part in the parade, but Boots was not going to be cheated out of his share of the fun and glory, and had jumped at the proposition of Joe Bunting that he should occupy the position which we have described.

Some inkling of the story which Mr. Huntly had told in the engine-house had got abroad, with the general conception that Boots had fallen heir to a large fortune, and that his first use of it had been to present this royal gift to his old firemen friends.

He received, therefore, such an ovation as few of his age and station had ever known, shouts and cheers greeting him at every point, and the beauty of the engine was to many lost in their admiration of the young hero who rode on it as on a throne of triumph.

When the procession ended and the new engine rounded into its future home, leaving the escorting companies to proceed to their respective houses, Boots sprang hastily down from his perch, his face red with mortification.

"I never knowed I was such a fool afore," he angrily declared. "If I'd had the sense of a suckin' pig I'd never let you stick me up there fur all them folks ter look at and howl at. If that's what you call glory I've got enough of it. Sooner been down blackin' boots than up there fur a pack o' fools to stare and yell at."

"That's what we call glory," replied one of

the firemen. "It isn't every boy of your size and style that can have the chance you've had to-day."

"Any boy as wants it could 'a' had it, if he'd only spoke in time," declared Boots. "He could 'a' had it fur an even swap, without any boot. You bet when you git this coon ter go through that sort o' thing ag'in it'll be arter folks quit eatin' ice-cream with a spoon."

A roar of laughter followed Boots's vigorous declaration of principles.

"Where's Mr. Huntly?" demanded Harry White, one of the firemen. "We left him here when we set out."

"I reckon he's like Boots, and don't take no stock in glory," answered Joe Bunting. "He's slid, for fear we'd be giving him a bucketful of blarney."

"Then he's got more sense in his little finger than I've got in my whole corporation," remarked Boots. "But the next time you git this customer to ride round the streets like a monkey on a donkey, it'll be arter persimmons begin ter grow on chestnut trees."

The boy, in fact, was thoroughly disgusted with his ovation, and had enough glory of that kind to last him for the rest of his natural life. It was not in his disposition to enjoy being made a show of.

The events of that day were not yet ended. A firemen's ball had been arranged by the Industry lads for the night, and it was not till the next day dawned that the stalwart fellows were ready to go home, having danced out their overflowing spirits and their shoe-leather together, in one of the wildest frolics the city had ever known.

Toward evening of the next day a group of the firemen gathered again at the engine-house, having slept off their fatigue.

Boots was present, but Mr. Huntly had not yet put in an appearance. His continued absence excited remark. They could not understand why he kept away from them on such an occasion.

"Maybe he's like Boots, struck comical with modesty," suggested Harry White.

"Took sick, maybe," remarked another. "He was far away from being strong."

"I'm a-goin' ter see," cried Boots, jumping to his feet at this suggestion. "If he's sick I reckon as how I'm wanted. It's queer as that idear didn't come inter my brain-pan afore."

"There's no room in that top-loft of yours for many ideas at once," retorted Joe Bunting. "You've been too full of glory to think of anything else."

"Anyhow, I'm done with glory," rejoined Boots. "Don't want no more o' that kind o' sugar in my coffee."

He left the house in his independent way. The wayward boy had become almost a man within the last few days. He had ceased to be the careless street Arab of a month or two before.

An hour elapsed before he again made his appearance. Then he broke into the engine-house with hasty steps and an excited face.

Several of the men sprung up in alarm on observing him.

"What is the matter? Has anything gone wrong with Mr. Huntly?"

"Dunno. Only he went out yesterday arternoon, and ain't showed hisself since. And he wasn't in no shape to be flirtn' round on an all-nighter."

"Oh, that's nothing. He may be visiting some of his friends."

"Nary time. He told the folks as he'd be home right arter supper. But that ain't the wu'st on't. They found this letter on the table in his room."

He handed a crumpled sheet to Joe Bunting, who ran his eye hastily over its contents.

"Read it out, Joe," cried one of the others. "Has somebody been playing it on Huntly? If there's anything in the wind they've got to steer clear of the Indy boys."

"This is the way it reads," remarked Joe, preparing once more to peruse the document.

"DEAR HUNTLY:—I reached here from Denver last night, and heard that you were here. I would have hunted you up, but am over head and ears in business. You know the sort of a chap I am, with never a minute to call my own."

"I want to see you bad, and I know you always have plenty of spare time. Can't you take pity on an old friend and run out here and see me? I want to have a long talk with you on old times, and there is a trifle of business we might settle. Don't fail."

"Your old crony,

"941 Gentry street. WILL BISHOP."

"There's nothing left-handed about that," remarked Harry White. "You couldn't get anything squarer."

"Square things sometimes have dodges hid in them," returned another.

"Tell you what it is," declared Joe, "this Benson is a deep one. He's a forger too, Mr. Huntly said. He knows no baby play will fool Huntly, and maybe he's forged a letter from an old friend of Huntly's to decoy him into a scrape."

"I calculate Mr. Huntly knows what he is about," rejoined Harry. "He's no gudgeon, to be took with a bare hook."

"Yet he did not come back last night, as he promised. And he isn't back yet."

"He may have more business then he calculated on with his old friend."

"And he may be lured into a hornets' nest."

"I'm a-goin' to find out," cried Boots, who had listened attentively to this conversation. "I know whereabouts Gentry street is, and it ain't no shakes of a street neither. There's some queer holes in it."

"That's so," declared Joe. "I wouldn't like to trust myself alone in some of them houses."

"Here goes on that lay," exclaimed Boots. "I'll fetch you back what pints I pick up."

They saw no more of Boots that night. It was late the next day when he made his appearance.

Several of the Indy boys were present. They had not yet got sufficiently over the recent excitement to return to their daily labor.

"What luck?" they cried.

"Jist as Joe Bunting said. It's all a dodge."

"The deuce you say! Let it out then. What have you picked up?"

"Nine forty-one Gentry is a 'spectable-lookin' shanty outside, but it ain't nothin' to crack on inside. It's alongside the old paper-mill, that's been shut up and tumbled in to pieces this ten year. I couldn't work no game to git in. They've got their eye-teeth cut, and are sharp as ten razors."

"Didn't you find out anything?"

"In course I did. What do you take me fur? I axed the neighbors all 'bout it. They ain't seen much, 'cause all's been mighty quiet, but one on 'em's seen a man round there that's as much like Benson as two peas. And they all say it's a squally shanty. Kinder mysterious, you know."

"Then, by Jupiter, something's got to be done!" Huntly's been decoyed there by his enemy, and he may be a dead man if we don't rescue him."

"How is it to be done?"

"That's what we want to settle on. Set down, fellers, an' let's talk it over. I reckon there's enough of us here to rig up some plan."

A long conference ensued which lasted till after dark. A dozen projects were discussed, from breaking into the house and rescuing Huntly by main force, to setting it on fire and saving their friend during the confusion.

Eight o'clock came and they were still debating, without having reached any definite conclusion.

At half-past eight their conference was broken up by the sharp clamor of the fire-alarm bells. A conflagration had broken out somewhere, and the new Industry engine was called to its first duty.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BURNING OF THE OLD PAPER-MILL.

FOR two months the Indy boys had not been out for a run, and they were in the highest of spirits at their present opportunity. No engine had ever been whirled over the cobble-stones of the Philadelphia streets with such rapidity. Several other companies attempted to run with them, but were soon left in the rear. The Indies were on their mettle.

This speed brought them to the scene of the fire in advance of any other company. To the surprise of those who had taken part in the late conversation the conflagration proved to be in the vicinity of Boots's recent scout.

In those days there was no telegraph service to advise the fire companies of the exact locality of a fire. The bells rung out the direction and the city district, giving a number of strokes for the district and another number for the direction. But the firemen were left to find out for themselves just where the fire existed.

It was with surprise, therefore, that the Indy lads discovered that the present fire was in Gentry street, the locality in which they were so strongly interested.

Their surprise became greater when they learned that the burning building was the old paper-mill, adjoining the house to which Mr. Huntly had been decoyed.

They looked at one another with a peculiar

intelligence in their eyes. Could any member of the company have started this fire? That was impossible; they were not that kind of men.

But less scrupulous persons sometimes made their way into the engine-houses. And several of these lawless individuals had been present that afternoon. Was this fire the work of one of them?

The Indy boys did not stop long to ask themselves these questions. The fire was burning, and it was their business to put it out. Some hose companies had reached the scene and made attachment to the fire plugs, and ere many minutes the new engine was showing her powers, in sending a rapid stream of water upon the flames.

The deserted and half ruined factory burned like a dry torch, the fire spreading with great rapidity, the flames soon pouring in profusion from windows and doorways.

The new Industry did her duty nobly, but the conflagration had gained too much head to be extinguished and the hissing streams that poured upon it seemed wasted in the blazing void, the water rising again in white clouds of steam.

"It's waste work, lads," cried Harry White. "That building is past saving. We had best let it burn and look out for the other houses."

"The roof of that next building is in a blaze," cried another.

"Turn your stream that way, Joe. You're wasting water now."

Joe Bunting, who was directing the stream, at once adopted this suggestion. The building whose roof was on fire, was that to which Mr. Huntly had been decoyed. Were he and his enemy still within it? If so why did not they make their escape?

A half dozen of the firemen ran to the door of this building, and shook it violently. It failed to yield to their strength, and seemed to be firmly barricaded within.

The shutters were also closed and fastened. No signs of life were anywhere visible.

The impatient firemen hammered and yelled, but no response came from inside. The house appeared to be deserted.

Meanwhile the fire had fairly caught to the roof, and seemed to be spreading despite the efforts of the firemen.

"Bring an ax here!" cried a burly fellow. "We must get into that house."

"Where are the hook and ladder fellows?" yelled another.

"Here they come! Yank a ladder this way like greased lightning!"

While this conversation was going on the West End engine came whirling up to the scene of the fire, and was maliciously jerked over the swollen hose of the Industry, starting a leak that cut off half the stream.

This was more than Indy flesh and blood could bear. A fierce uproar instantly ensued, curses being followed by blows.

In less time than it takes to tell it, a sharp fight had arisen between the hostile companies, the fire being forgotten while they fought out their old feud.

To what lengths it might have gone was not easy to tell. It was brought to a sudden end by an unexpected circumstance.

A full stream from the Fairmount engine was turned upon the quarrelsome rivals, drenching them in a moment from head to foot and cooling their ardor in the quickest time possible.

They separated and fled hastily from the drenching flood, while the shrewd fellow who had treated them to this shower-bath called out:

"Blast your eyes! is that what you're here for? Put out the fire, and then you can fight yourselves blind!"

During this interval the fire had spread with great rapidity. The roof of the house was now a sheet of flames, which seemed to be working their way to a lower level.

The effort to enter the house had been disturbed by the quarrel, and it still continued closed and defiant in aspect.

Yet a change had taken place in the condition of affairs. One person had already made his way inside the house. This was no less a personage than Boots, who was too much interested in the fate of Mr. Huntly to let anything distract him from his purpose.

While the firemen were engaged in front, he had made his way to the rear of the building.

He found it closed here as firmly as in front. But a grapevine arbor led up to a shed over the rear door, and the latter to one of the windows on the second floor.

It was as good as a ladder to the active boy. He climbed up the arbor with cat-like agility

and quickly gained the shed, up which he scrambled to the window.

The sash of this proved to be fastened, but there was no time to stand on ceremony now. A few blows from a club that Boots had brought with him made short work with the glass. Another blow smashed through the framework.

In an instant more he crept through the opening and was safely inside the burning house.

Where he stood all was still and shadowy, though partly lighted up by the indirect glare of the flames.

The adventurous boy stood for several minutes to regain breath after his exertions, and to await developments. At first the room in which he stood seemed dark, from the brilliant gleam of the flames to which his eyes had been exposed.

But after a minute or two he grew accustomed to the situation, and found himself in a square room whose door opened into a narrow entry.

He listened intently for indications of life in the house. But the noise in the street and the roar of the flames drowned all minor sounds until he had advanced from the room into the entry.

Then faint undertones came to his ears, which he quickly distinguished as the voices of men, though they were nearly lost under the external noises.

They seemed to come from a point in advance. He moved forward until he found himself beside another door, that was nearly but not entirely closed.

Now the voices came clearer and louder. Boots stood and listened intently, his face lightning up with intelligence as he recognized familiar tones.

It was a moment for action rather than rest and attention. The house was burning over his head, and the roof at any moment might fall in and crush the floor below it.

Yet what he heard was too important to be missed, and he stood listening without a thought of peril.

The voices continued, the listener drawing nearer and nearer to the crack in the door, and displaying every minute more eagerness and excitement.

At length the scene within appeared to have reached its culminating point. A flash of intelligence passed over the listener's face, he opened the door with a quick push and entered.

What he saw and what he did were matters of the utmost importance to the characters of our story. But the detail of these events we must leave to a new chapter, and must first go back and describe what it was that had made such an impression on the youthful listener.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRIUMPH OF HONESTY.

THE surmise that Mr. Huntly had been decoyed by a false letter, forged by his enemy, was correct. He had been lured to the house on Gentry street, and was there at the moment that the Industry rushed up to the scene of the conflagration.

He was not there willingly. The trick had quickly become apparent to him, but in his state of physical weakness he was no match for his enemy.

On discovering that he was in a man-trap he had made a desperate effort to escape, but without success.

A severe struggle had taken place, ending in his being felled to the floor by an instrument resembling a slung shot in the hands of his foe.

He was quickly on his feet again, and had grasped a heavy chair as a weapon, but ere he could renew the fight Benson slipped from the room and locked the door.

The decoyed man was a prisoner. The door was not a particularly strong one, and with his ordinary strength he could have broken it down. But just now he was too weak and exhausted for such an effort.

The window was nailed down, too firmly for him to move the sash. And outside it was closed with strong blinds which were likewise nailed fast. Just then it was beyond his power to escape.

He passed a sleepless night. He was too much excited and troubled for slumber to visit his eyelids. Moreover he was afraid to let himself go to sleep. Foolishly he had kept about him the important papers which his enemy sought to obtain. If he yielded to slumber they might be taken from him while in an unconscious state.

Yet as the next day passed on a fit of drowsiness came upon him despite his every effort to dispel it. He walked briskly about the room to

keep himself awake, yet involuntarily his step wavered and his eyes grew heavy.

He felt that he must yield to slumber, but with one last instinct of caution he took the papers from his pocket and concealed them beneath a heap of loose papers in the drawer of a bureau that formed part of the furniture of the room.

Ten minutes afterward he was fast asleep. Night had fallen before he awaked. He had been locked in slumber for hours, and darkness was now upon the earth.

Yet the room was not dark. A peculiar lurid glare made its way in through the closed blinds of the window. Strange noises were audible outside. The paper mill was in flames and the street was full of excited spectators.

Disturbed by this strange light and the sounds which accompanied it the newly awakened man attempted to rise, but found it impossible to do so. He seemed to be glued fast to the bed on which he lay, and could move neither hand nor foot.

A peculiar, demoniac laugh met his ears. He turned his eyes toward its direction, and there saw the tigerish face of his enemy, Philip Benson.

"You here again!" cried Huntly, sharply, shaking off the remnants of his drowsiness.

"You could not have better company," sneered the villain. "Why do you not rise to greet your guest?"

Huntly made another effort to obey this suggestion, but with the same ill-fortune as before. He now perceived what his sleepiness had previously prevented. He was firmly bound down on the bed, by length after length of rope, which had been wrapped around him and the bedstead.

His foe had taken advantage of his sleep to bind him movelessly to his couch. He was helplessly in the power of his mortal enemy.

The face of the entrapped man flamed with fury as he looked into the sneering and triumphant eyes of his foe.

"Devil!" he hissed between his teeth.

"That name will do as well as any," replied Benson. "I am not particular. I hope you enjoy the situation."

"You dare not release me and give me an equal chance, you villainous coward!"

"No, my dear fellow, and I have something else for your private ear. The building next to this is on fire. The roof of this building is burning. In ten minutes the fire will be down to this room. You escaped me once, John Huntly. I fancy it will not be so easy to escape again."

"Hound! would you leave me here to burn?"

"I am not anxious to harm you, Huntly. We were good friends once. But you have chosen to put yourself across my path, and I have no mercy on any man who does that."

"I was your friend while you was an honest man."

"You may as well save your breath from raking up old scores, Huntly. You hold me in your power with that forged paper. I have turned the tables and you are in my power now."

"Did you dream I was the man to help you in your rascality? That helpless child whom you had stolen—I have discovered him. Do you fancy that I shall let you enjoy the fortune of which you robbed him?"

"I know all that, Huntly. You have talked a little too much for your own good. I know, moreover, that you have certain papers about you which are of great importance to me. I have searched you for them during your sleep."

"And did not find them!" exclaimed Huntly, with a laugh of triumph. "You have missed it in that, Benson. The papers are in good hands. Your only way of recovering them is to release me. If any harm comes to me the lawyer who holds them will proceed against you without delay."

His laugh was echoed by a sardonic one from his enemy.

"That game won't work, John Huntly," he replied. "Unluckily for you, I happen to know where they are. This room is not as secret as you imagine. I saw you hide them, and they are in my possession at this minute."

Huntly involuntarily turned his eyes toward the bureau drawer in which he had hidden the papers. For the moment he taken by surprise.

A flash of intelligence shot across Benson's cunning face. With a quick leap he sprang toward the drawer on which Huntly's eyes had fixed themselves, tore it open, and began flinging its contents to the floor.

Within a minute he had emptied it. From the folds of the newspapers it had held there fell the two hidden documents.

He snatched them up and ran his eyes over

them with frantic haste, while an oath of anger and dismay broke from Huntly's pallid lips.

"I am wonderfully obliged to you, friend Huntly," remarked the villain, with a smile of devilish malignity on his face. "But you would have done better to have bought your liberty with these papers. I am under no promise to you now."

"Devil! You are not going to leave me here to burn?"

"I am not safe with you at liberty. I do not intend to run any risks. Your fate is sealed, John Huntly."

"Hound and demon!—what ails those lagging firemen? Why do they not break in?"

"I intend to provide against any such contingency," said the sneering villain. "You escaped me once. You shall not again."

He laid the recovered documents on a table, gathered up the heap of papers, and thrust them under the bedclothing, then struck a match and touched the flame to the paper.

In an instant it blazed up.

"That is the fate I intend for you, John Huntly. Good-by for this world."

As he spoke these words the door of the room flew open, and Boots, who had been listening to this conversation outside, sprang into the room.

The first movement was to snatch the papers from the table, and thrust them into the leg of one of his boots.

"I wouldn't say good-by just yet," he mockingly cried. "You're goin' a bit too soon."

"Boots!" yelled Huntly, in sudden hope. "Come here! Cut me loose! Stab that hound if he interferes!"

Ere the boy could draw his knife to do so, Benson had sprung with catlike fury upon him. Boots wielded his club freely, yet he was no match for his assailant, who in a moment had clasped him in his arms.

But other hopeful sounds were now audible. At that instant there came a loud crash from below, and the noise of running feet was heard on the lower floor.

And at the same moment the top of a ladder struck the house beside the window, and active feet ran up its slender rounds.

A yell from the boy followed these welcome sounds. The approaching steps could be heard on the stairs.

Yet the blazing paper had set fire to the bedclothes. The bound man was in deadly peril. And Benson, strong with fury, had snatched the boy from his feet, and was carrying him in fury to the blazing bed.

One further yell broke from the lips of the alarmed youth.

At the same moment a man sprang through the open door. Others were visible behind him.

One glance revealed the situation. It was Harry White who had entered, and they were Indy boys who followed.

With a cry of astonishment and rage the active fireman sprang to the bedside, drawing his knife as he did so.

One quick movement of the sharp blade severed every strand of the rope. Huntly, released from his bonds, sprang hastily to his feet.

But instead of obeying the instinct of escape he leaped through the flames on his foe, who was at that moment in the act of flinging his youthful captive on the blazing bed.

The onset carried Benson to the floor and released his prisoner.

A half dozen of the Indy firemen were now in the room, facing the discomfited villain. Drawing a revolver from his pocket he sprang forward, yelling:

"Make way there! I'll shoot the man that dares to stop me!"

As he spoke the shutter was torn open with a crash, the sash dashed in, and several men jumped from the ladder into the room.

Heedless of their coming Harry White hurled the heavy knife in his hand at the villain, with such sure aim as to knock the pistol from his grasp, and leave him unarmed.

"Take him prisoner! he is a robber and murderer!" cried Harry.

"To the rescue, West-Enders!" screamed Benson in reply. "These men are trying to kill me. Save me from them."

The Indies turned and saw that they were confronted by a force of their foes, the ladder-men being members of the hostile company.

A fight at once commenced, fierce blows being given and returned. The cunning villain, whose cry had given rise to it, took instant advantage of the opportunity to seek to escape.

He dashed hastily past the combatants and through the open door, followed only by Boots and Mr. Huntly, who alone had kept clear of the combat.

Along the outer hall the escaping villain flew, toward a stairway which descended into the rear end of the building.

He had the start, and had gained the head of the stairs by the time that his pursuers were fairly outside the room.

They went no further. At that instant they beheld a terrible vision that could never again be wiped out from their memories.

For just then the roof, which had burned with particular fury at that point, sagged in, its supporting beams giving way. In its fall the weak party-wall between the house and the old factory gave way, and a blazing void was revealed, into which the escaping villain was helplessly hurled.

The spectators of this terrible scene for the moment closed their eyes to shut out the dreadful sight. They then ran back to the room which they had just left.

"Stop your fighting!" cried Huntly, in tones of authority. "There is a horrible business here. The wall has given way, and Benson has been hurled into the sea of fire. The villain has met a dreadful fate."

At this thrilling announcement the fighting firemen rushed forward, forgetting their feud in the new source of excitement. A single glance proved to them the truth of what Huntly had declared. The man for whom they fought was lost beyond recall.

And danger surrounded them where they stood. The fallen wall had weakened the floor, which was sagging downward. It might yield and fall toward the burning factory at any moment.

"Get! for your lives!" cried Harry White. "We'll all follow Benson if we stay here."

Two minutes sufficed to empty the house of all its inmates. And they were but little too soon. For quickly afterward the remainder of the party-wall fell, and the upper floors sagged down into the blazing factory.

It was impossible to do more for factory or house. The firemen now turned their attention to the surrounding buildings, their efforts being directed toward preventing the further spread of the conflagration.

Two hours afterward the Industry company returned home, whither Boots and the rescued captive had preceded them.

With the death of the villain and the recovery of the papers, which the boy had shrewdly thrust into the wide leg of one of his treasured boots, our story properly ends.

We must be very brief in describing the future history of our characters.

The property which Benson had gained by forgery, and by the kidnapping of the child who was left under his guardianship, was a valuable one, amounting to nearly one hundred thousand dollars in value.

Mr. Huntly was thoroughly acquainted with all the particulars concerning it, and with the aid of the papers which he had recovered, and other evidence which he easily obtained, he had no difficulty in proving Benson's villainy, and that the boy we have known as Boots was the true heir.

After a thorough investigation the courts decided the case in the boy's favor.

One of the first acts of Boots on becoming a "capitalist" was to insist on paying the full cost of the new Industry engine. But, as for his valued boots, he did not give them to Joe Bunting for his glass case, but insisted on keeping them himself, as one of his choicest treasures.

Under the care of Mr. Huntly the street Arab was well educated, and to-day, under his proper name of Horace Wilson, could never be recognized by any who knew him under his old cognomen of Boots.

He is now an active business man, married and living in a handsome mansion, with a family growing up about him. Mr. Huntly forms one of his family, and is his most cherished friend.

As for the Indy engine-company, it has ceased to exist. The steam engines and the paid fire-department have driven the old volunteer organizations out of existence.

But Horace Wilson is still Boots to his old friends of the company, and it will be a long day before he lets wealth make him forget the friends of his days of poverty.

THE END.

Edward L. Wheeler's

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